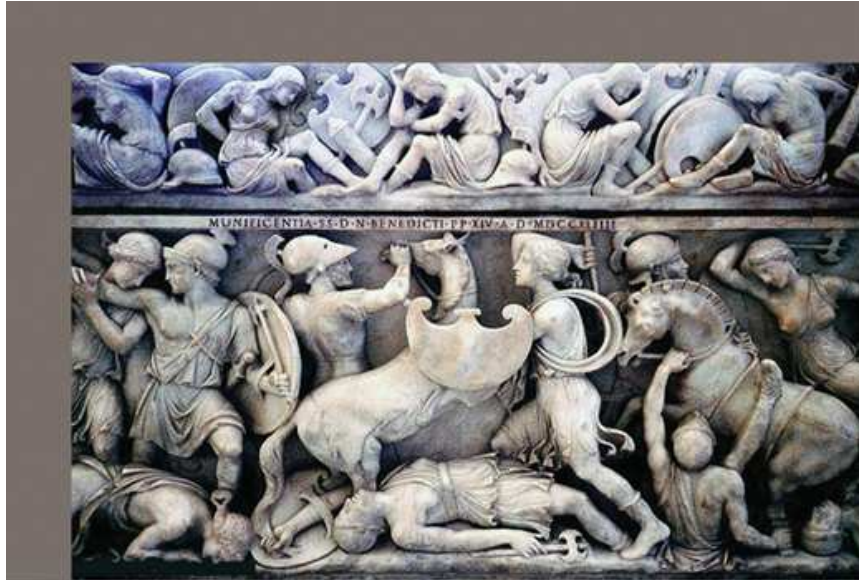




AMAZON MOON

A NOVEL BY

James A. Haught



Warrior women

In Ancient Greece, extreme male supremacy kept women subjugated as housebound servants lacking education or rights. Many were slaves or concubines. Yet, in a strange contrast, Greek male artisans portrayed bold, free, fighting females — the Amazons — in multitudes of paintings, writings and sculptures (such as the carved sarcophagus above).

In this novel, Amazons were brave women who fled from servitude. They lived as rebels, and kept some wounded male captives as slave-concubines of their own. Their story is told by a captured scribe who recorded their stormy lives of danger and passion. The Amazons existed only briefly, but they blazed with wild spirit.



James A. Haught is editor of West Virginia's largest newspaper, *The Charleston Gazette*. He is author of six previous nonfiction books.

Amazon Moon

a novel by

James A. Haught

BookLocker

Bangor, Maine, USA

www.BookLocker.com

*For spirited women, seekers of wisdom, opponents
of war, and good couples everywhere.*

Copyright 2007 James A. Haught

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced by
any means without permission of the publisher, except for citations in
book reviews or news articles.

Published in the United States by BookLocker

ISBN 978-1-60145-159-0

First edition

Printed in the U.S.A.

BookLocker

Bangor, ME

www.booklocker.com

Front cover picture: Amazon warrior by Franz von Stuck (1863-
1928). Public domain image from Sacred Texts Archive.

Back cover picture: Greek-versus-Amazon battle carving on an
ancient sarcophagus, Vatican Museum, Rome. Public domain image from
FreeStockPhotos.com

Cover and interior art layout: Brenda Pinnell

Technical help: Jenny Lilly, Greg Wood



AMAZON MOON

Previous books by James A. Haught

Holy Horrors: An Illustrated History of Religious
Murder and Madness (1990)

Science in a Nanosecond: Answers to 100 Basic
Science Questions (1990)

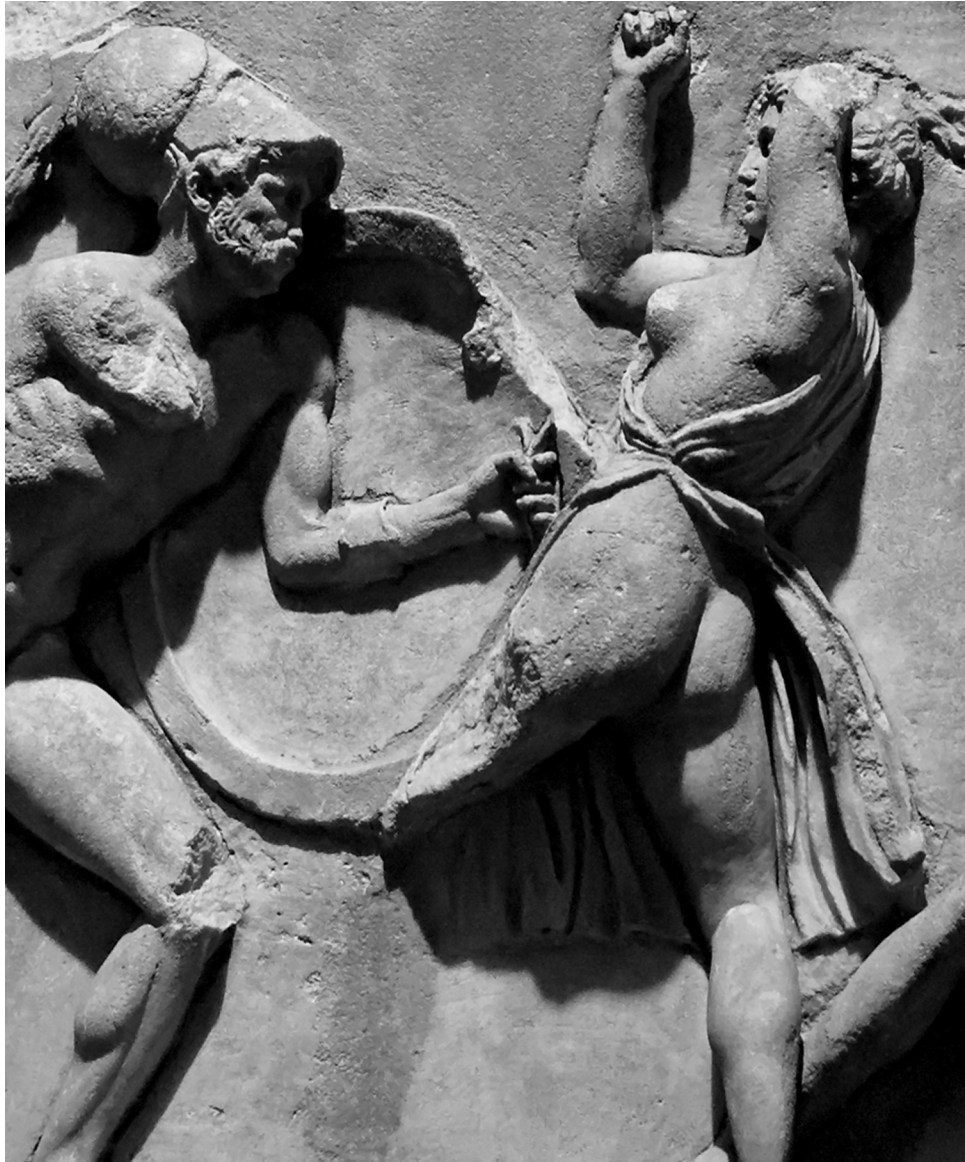
The Art of Lovemaking: An Illustrated Tribute (1992)

Holy Hatred: Religious Conflicts of the '90s (1995)

2,000 Years of Disbelief: Famous People With the
Courage to Doubt (1996)

Honest Doubt: Essays on Atheism in a Believing
Society (2007)

(all published by Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY)



One of many Greek-versus-Amazon battle friezes from the tomb of Mausolus at Halikarnassos, Greece, fourth century BCE, which ranked among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. (British Museum, London. Public domain image from Wikimedia Commons.)

Characters

Modern:

JACK HASTINGS and CAROLINA KING, young American archeologists who join an international dig in northern Greece.

DR. CHICHESTER, their craggy British director.

Ancient:

MELOS, a teen-age scribe who comes of age, sees violence as a noncombatant, suffers slavery, loses his virginity, falls in love, witnesses tragedy--and reaches wisdom, disdaining the warfare, religious sacrifices and slavery around him.

LITHA, a spirited young slave woman who stabs her oppressive owner and runs off to join the Amazons. She finds Melos, slave of the warrior women, and becomes his lover.

MITHA, older sister of Litha, who escapes with her. Both are blondish Slavs who were captured by Greeks and put into slavery.

OVERSEER, cousin of a rich family that owns the farm village of Melos and Litha.

RECTUS, best friend of Melos, son of the wealthy Overseer.

HIGH SCRIBE, Kavopolis official who trains Melos in writing.

DALIEN, aristocratic soldier wounded and captured along with Melos.

WAR QUEEN, Saria, chief of the Amazon fighting force.

HOME QUEEN, Hella, chief of other Amazon village functions.

EILA, sensual priestess of the Amazon colony.

LEEANTHA, tough woman warrior who screams during sex.

COMELLA, sturdy, funny, bawdy warrior.

ALETHA, temple prostitute turned Amazon.

RACHA, black Nubian from the Nile Valley who became an Amazon.

THEBA, daughter of a Thebes prince's concubine.

ASPASIA, descendant of a famed Athens courtesan.

OCTOS, one-legged male soldier-slave, a rogue and skeptic.

ANKUS, long-bearded male slave, keenly intelligent.

PENDILEE, young woman rescued from a Greek slave auction.

ARCTINUS, macho Greek ex-soldier and patriot.

PRINCESS XANTHIA, who is captured by Amazons and joins them.

ADMER, devout soldier-slave who prays and wears magical amulets.

AUGUR, sappy astrologer who gets everything wrong.

OLANDRA, battle-maimed Amazon who serves as lookout.

OONA, the smallest Amazon warrior, caught by a Greek patrol.

COMMANDER MALGON, Greek officer whose squad suffers a midnight Amazon raid.

COMMANDER PATROS, Greek officer who heads a search-and-destroy mission against the Amazon hideaway



Amazon Preparing for Battle, by Pierre-Eugene-Emile Hebert, 1853. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Pepita Milmore Memorial Fund



***Battle of the Amazons*, by Peter Paul Rubens, 1618. Alte Pinakothek museum, Munich, Germany**

Chapters

ANCIENT

1 - A deadly Greek army attack on an Amazon hideout looms.

MODERN

2 - American archeology student couple analyzes extreme subjugation of women in Ancient Greece, an odd contrast to the era's many paintings, sculptures and writings about fierce warrior women.

3 - The lover-archeologists join a Mediterranean dig and find the first written account of an Amazon clan.

ANCIENT

4 - Melos tells of his village, boyhood, doubts, and his reaction to the flogging of the slave girl Litha.

5 - Melos becomes a teen-age scribe, later assigned to a military brigade.

6 - A midnight attack decimates the brigade. Melos, wounded, is taken by Amazon raiders to their hidden colony as a slave-concubine.

7 - Litha reappears and tells of an Underground Railroad guiding runaway females to the Amazon hideaway.

8 - An arrogant soldier-prisoner cites Aristotle on natural slaves and male dominance over women.

9 - Melos finds the joy of sex. The arrogant soldier is killed during an escape attempt.

10 - A wounded Amazon dies despite prayers and sacrifices. Melos begins teaching Amazons to read and write.

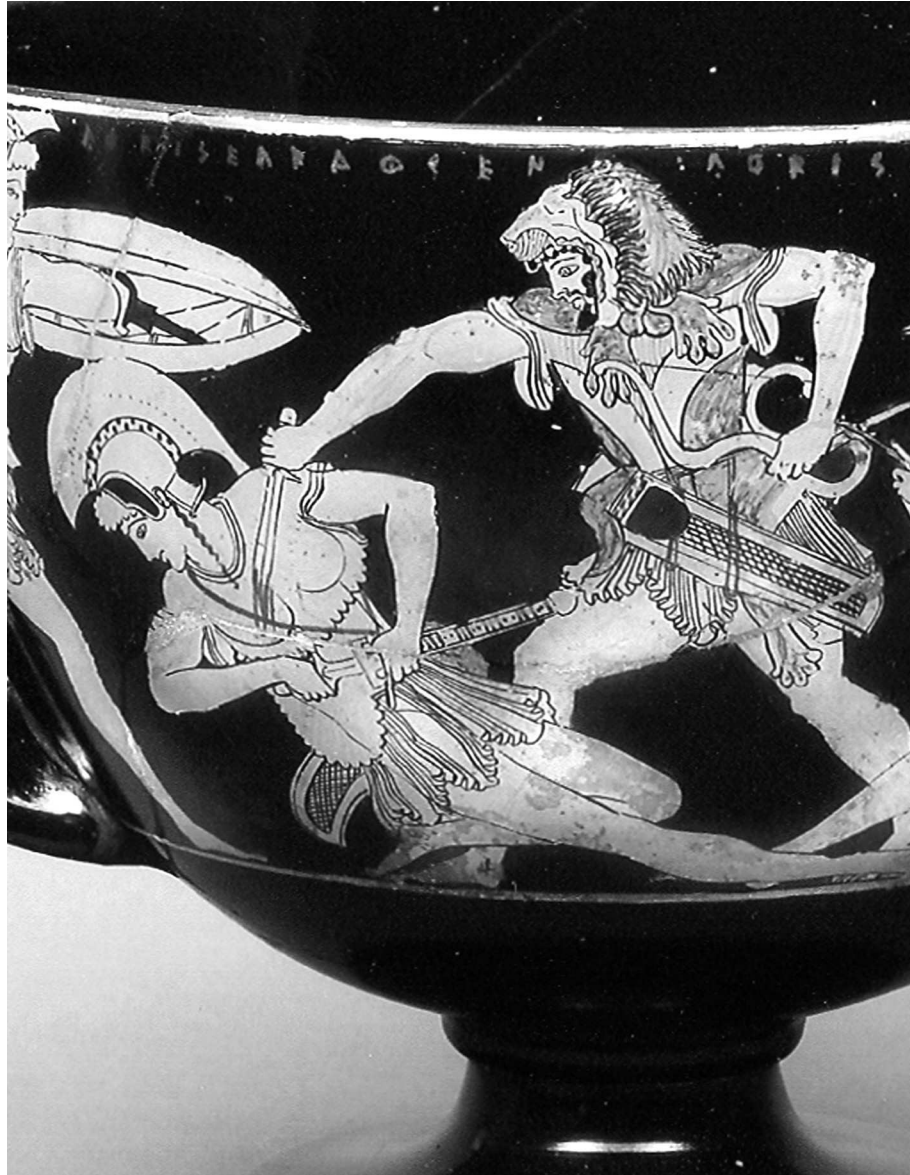
11 - Melos records the Amazon colony's history.

12 - Melos records Aletha, Racha, Theba, Olandra tales.

- 13 - Litha wants Melos. They become lovers.
- 14 - Melos is punished for letting girls read skeptical scrolls.
- 15 - Greek science breakthroughs. An Epicurus scroll is even worse sacrilege.
- 16 - Warrior trainee Mitha joins her first caravan raid.
- 17 - Princess Xanthia invents stirrups.
- 18 - Octos tells of his oracle caper.
- 19 - Amazons break a brothel siege.
- 20 - Aspasia's Amazon group is discovered.
- 21 - A slave market raid triggers a Greek attack on Aspasia's group.
- 22 - Pendilee's slave story.
- 23 - Human sacrifice horror.
- 24 - Arctinus plots revolt but Melos thwarts it.
- 25 - Mitha-Melos mess mangles monogamy.
- 26 - Ankus explains the Sacred Wars.
- 27 - Sex in a storm, followed by a flood rescue.
- 28 - Augur the astrologer bungles again.
- 29 - Admer loses his faith.
- 30 - Oona is executed. Amazons take revenge.
- 31 - Wheat harvest. More runaways arrive.
- 32 - Litha and Melos flee but are caught.
- 33 - A gory Greek attack strikes the Amazon colony.
- 34 - Melos and Litha live alone in the deserted village.

MODERN

- 35 - The archeologist couple recounts Melos-Litha wisdom in book lectures.



**Hercules killing an Amazon. Ancient Greek red-figure drinking bowl, c. 490 BCE.
Royal Museums of Art and History, Brussels, Belgium**

1

"Sing out. Hup, ho. Roll her over in the clover. Make her laugh. Make her cry. Make a baby bye and bye."

The brawny Greek warriors chanted to liven their march in late-summer heat up the wide Thermodon Valley south of the Black Sea. They were an elite troop, deadly fighters, expert with sword, bow, ax, javelin and mace. Killing is the occupation of soldiers, and they were masters of their craft. They were battle-tested, hardened to shrieks of death, renowned for combat spirit. "Fire from Zeus," declared their platoon flag bearing a lightning bolt.

All the soldiers had been proclaimed patriotic heroes by the Kavopolis Assembly for their part in a gory victory over Dorians. They were equipped with the finest iron swords forged at the Chalcis foundry on the island Euboea, and with the strongest bows made of horn: state-of-the-art killing instruments. The unit contained seven horseback lancers, thirteen archers, twenty foot-soldiers, a camp cook and a supply wagon, all under leadership of hawk-faced Commander Patros.

The warriors were on a search-and-destroy mission. From spy intelligence, they knew the concealed location of their target, a secret colony of rebels hidden in an isolated side-valley. The mouth of that valley was overgrown by an impenetrable thicket of thorn trees and vines. The spot appeared to be lonely wilderness. But the spy report disclosed that, beside a cliff at one edge of the ravine, tree branches could be pulled aside, revealing a narrow lane into the enclave. Also, the report said, occupants of the hidden colony always kept a sentry posted on a ledge above the cliff, lest outsiders discover the unknown sanctuary.

Commander Patros rode at the front, tall on a high black steed, a stiff figure of authority. From a rich family, he exuded the confidence of rank, social and military. Approaching a riverbend, he swung his horse and squelched the chanting.

"Silence among the troops."

The commander led the unit off the trail into the screen of trees. The men threaded the forest quietly until Patros waved a halt. He dismounted and peered between trunks at an overgrown side-valley barely visible ahead. He summoned a wiry archer he had selected for a stealthy task, and instructed him carefully:

"Don't approach directly or you will be seen. The sentry will sound an alarm and we will lose the element of surprise. Instead, climb the intervening hill, cross the ridge, and descend silently from above, unseen. After the sentry is removed, signal us and we will advance."

The archer checked his weaponry, test-pulled his bowstring, saluted, and hastened toward the hill. Grass of the valley floor was baked dull but foliage on the hillsides remained lush. The bowman stayed within the cover of bushes as he crept to the top, then quietly descended the opposite slope.

The sentry, a young Amazon, was bored from staring at the still ravine. Day after day she had served her shift on the clifftop ledge without even a passing squirrel to break the monotony. Around her neck, suspended by a leather thong, was a trumpet crafted from a ram's horn. In event of intruders, she was to sound it and run down the path to the village, blowing as she went, to alert the whole Amazon colony. But the trumpet never had been blown, neither by her nor others taking their turns on watch.

The sentry's hair was honey color, unlike the black locks of most Mediterranean people, indicating that her ancestors had been Slavs from the north. In the sultry heat, she wore the briefest tunic. She paced back and forth on the ledge, restless. She watched a spider string its web between branches of a bush. She scratched and fidgeted. She stretched and yawned. She was in mid-yawn when the arrow pierced her heart. She looked astonished and clutched the shaft protruding between her breasts. She tried to gasp but couldn't breathe. Her knees buckled. She fell onto the front of the ledge and tumbled down the cliff.

Moments later, the archer emerged into the Thermodon Valley sunshine and waved to the waiting platoon. Commander Patros signaled the advance. The warriors left the woods, approached the side-valley, and carefully entered the hidden lane by the cliff. They passed the twisted body of the sentry, her arms and legs skewed oddly.

The Greek fighters neared the upstream edge of the thicket. Through branches they glimpsed the colony, the secret village of Amazons. Some women splashed nude in a dammed creek. Others cooked in doorways. In vegetable gardens, male slaves hoed under female supervision. A few girl children were seen.

Hidden by greenery, Patros quietly arrayed his warriors for the attack. Horsemen readied their lances. Archers fitted arrows to strings. Foot soldiers drew their swords and adjusted their shields. Silently the commander raised his arm to launch the surprise assault.

2

The television set, tuned to a light classics channel, exuded a tender Chopin nocturne. But the nude couple on a livingroom rug before a glowing gas fireplace barely noticed. They clutched each other fervently in the agonized ecstasy of lovemaking, gasping and moaning. They were like a pair of wild animals. Afterward they sank limp in each other's arms, breathing heavily. She recited softly:

"They made love as if they were an endangered species."

"What's that from?"

"A Peter DeVries novel, I think."

As new lovers, Jack Hastings and Carolina King basked in happiness. Each evening, after their university classes and student jobs, they hurried home to their off-campus flat and the joy of being together: sharing candlelight dinners, studying head-to-head at the kitchen table, watching television entwined on the couch, making rapturous love night after night. Sometimes they remained naked all weekend in the privacy of their hideaway.

"That's what I like, quick access to your body," Jack said, patting her.

With a well-directed squeeze, she showed that his was just as accessible.

Some nights they slept like cradled spoons. He curled around her from behind, cupping her breasts in his hands.

"Do you suppose males have been holding females like this since cave days?"

"Probably," she answered, adding tongue-in-cheek: "Maybe that can be your next research project."

Both were 24. Both were completing master's degrees in archeology, focusing on ancient Greece. They had met in a classic

languages seminar and felt instant affinity. Jack liked her spirited intelligence and unadorned good looks. She was oblivious to hairdos, cosmetics, fashions and jewelry but was alluring in jeans or shorts. She liked his honest eyes and lean fitness. After a few dates they wound up in her dormitory bed. Then they moved into the low-rent flat together. Both had gone through brief previous romances, but their bond with each other was deeper.

One morning after lovemaking, as they cuddled nude in each other's arms, Jack mischievously began humming the melody, "Nothing could be finer than to be in Carolina in the morning." At first, in her dreamy state, Carolina didn't detect his wordless joke. Then she sat upright in mock outrage.

"You clod! How unromantic!" She walloped him with a pillow while he laughed and shielded his head with his arms.

Thereafter, on mornings when they felt amorous, as he groped under her nightgown and her body responded, she eyed him archly and cautioned: "No more humming." He smiled and recited, "Yes, dear." She added, squirming naked against him: "And don't think it, either." At that point, he would do anything she asked. "Of course not."

He realized that his craving for her was growing into love.

Archeology consumed them. She had grown up in rural southern Ohio, Adena mound country. When she was in grade school, her uncle, digging in his garden, found flint arrowheads chipped by Indians. She became fascinated by traces of long-vanished peoples. In high school she joined an archeology club and helped unearth remnants of ancient villages, finding patterns of life that existed centuries ago. Jack was raised in Arizona near abandoned cliff dwellings that once teemed with pre-Pueblo life. He too was tantalized by the detective work of sifting fragmentary clues to fathom long-ago cultures that disappeared.

Both had finished their bachelor degrees with honors. For their master's theses, they chose two aspects of classical Greece. He outlined slavery that sustained Greek society. About half of that ancient populace consisted of bondservants. Some entered slavery by being born to bondwomen, some by being abandoned as children or sold by poor families, some by being captured in endless warfare in Aegean coastal lands. Affluent homes had several domestic slaves. Farms, mines,

tanneries, quarries, brickyards, logging camps, carpenter shops, potteries, slaughterhouses and other workplaces operated on captive labor. Slavery upheld the economy. Many bondservants were Slavs, from whom the word slave derived.

Both Jack and Carolina had mastered classic Greek language. Hour after hour he pored over digitized images of ancient documents via his laptop computer.

"The Internet is incredible," he said, looking up from his screen. "I can find all the writing fragments in twenty European museums, just by clicking. I've got the whole Library of Congress and Athens Museum at my fingertips. A few years ago, this much research would have taken months."

For her thesis, Carolina chose a more intriguing topic: the strange contradiction posed by Amazons. Why did Greek males subjugate women completely, yet create more than a thousand writings, paintings and sculptures about fierce warrior women, the opposite of subdued Greek females? The first draft of her thesis began:

In ancient Greece, as in many past cultures (and a few present ones) male supremacy reigned to an extreme. Women mostly were chattel, possessions of men, scarcely above slaves, rarely educated. The whole society deemed them inferior. During Greece's Golden Age, around 25 centuries ago, great male thinkers taught male pupils the earliest known ventures into logic and scientific reason, planting intellectual seeds that gradually undermined the gods and magic of the times. But females rarely were allowed into this learning or any other activity outside the home. Typically, a woman was confined to a man's house and courtyard along with his other belongings. She prepared food, provided sex, raised children, and obeyed.

Female babies were less wanted, often placed on trash heaps to die. Some poor families sold daughters to slave traders or brothel owners. Otherwise, a girl stayed inside her father's house until about age fifteen. Then her father arranged a marriage to a suitable man, usually

around thirty, and paid the groom a dowry to bribe him to take her. Thus the girl ceased belonging to her father and belonged instead to a man she hadn't met. Thereafter she remained within her husband's house and grounds as his possession. If he was kindly, she was fortunate. If he was abusive, she had little choice but to suffer.

If her husband was affluent enough to afford household slaves, the wife served as their overseer, although her status barely exceeded theirs. Poor homes lacked slaves, and wives performed all the housekeeping labor.

Carolina quoted Euripides' classic play, written in the fifth century BCE, in which Medea lamented: "Women would be better off as cattle than as we are, a subspecies of the human race. First, at great expense, we buy ourselves a husband. What is a dowry unless a payment for marriage? But then he owns us, especially our bodies."

Carolina quoted a Sophocles play of the same era in which Procne, wife of Tereus, protested: "We women are nothing.... When we attain maidenhood, we are driven away from our homes, sold as merchandise, and compelled to marry. Some go to strange men's homes, others to foreigners, some to joyless houses, some to hostile. Once the first night has yoked us to our husbands, we are forced to praise him and say that all is well."

Although Carolina never attended feminist rallies, she resented mistreatment of women. Her thesis enabled her to vent. Her draft continued:

Officially, polygamy didn't exist in ancient Greece, yet it was common, and wives were forced to endure it. A man with sufficient income could bring home slave girls or concubines purchased from brothels, creating his private harem. Outside his home, he could pay elite prostitutes called hetaera, or dally with common streetwalkers, or visit holy hookers in temples to the gods. The great Aphrodite

temple at Corinth reputedly contained more than a thousand consecrated prostitutes mixing sex and religion, earning fees that enriched the house of worship and its priests.

Oddly, since each respectable female was confined to her husband's or father's home, the only women seen in public were the elegant hetaera or lowly street prostitutes, plus an occasional foreign visitor not subject to Greece's strictures.

One reason that Greek men deemed women inferior was that they were of little use in Greece's recurring warfare, because they were smaller and less muscled. In those times, combat was largely face to face: brutal chopping, spearing, clubbing and stabbing, toe to toe. Testosterone-laced males, larger and stronger, were the warriors. Heroes were powerful hulks who could kill the most rivals. It was a macho bloodbath. Women had no place in the gore.

Then Carolina turned to the great contradiction and mystery of the Amazons:

Amid the male rule, an oddity occurred. Many male writers, painters and sculptors portrayed fierce female warriors--Amazons--who renounced men, lived apart from them, and fought them in combat. They were a stark opposite of most Greek women. This contrast has puzzled researchers for centuries. In most of the tales, strong Greek fighters killed the lighter Amazons or took them captive. This has led some psychologists to speculate that the stories were myths reinforcing the male need for domination--or a veiled warning to Greek women, showing them what would happen if they rebelled against their subjugation. Did the Amazons really exist or were they a male fantasy? This question has plagued scholars.

More than a thousand ancient Greek pottery paintings and sculpted reliefs bear Amazon battle scenes. Carved burial vaults feature the fighting females. Even the majestic Parthenon temple of Athens displays Amazon combat. No other topic was more prevalent in classic Greek art. Museums around the world contain multitudes of these works unearthed by archeologists.

About fifty ancient Greek and Roman bards told of Amazons. Unfortunately, many of their writings were rhapsodic poetry, vivid chronicles of mighty heroes entangled with gods, goddesses, astounding creatures and magical happenings. Also, some of the accounts differ greatly. Finding reliable facts amid the contradictions and supernatural hokum is difficult. Early Greek poems, like most parts of the Bible, were recited orally by troubadours before they finally were preserved in writing (sometimes on thin sheets of wood, or painted onto pottery, or inked onto perishable papyrus from Egypt, or inscribed in wax, and finally penned onto durable parchment from sheep hide). Writing flowered after Greeks became the first to develop an alphabet with vowels, enabling spoken sounds to be written down more easily.

The warrior women were mentioned in the very first known European story, Homer's *Iliad*, a long account of 54 days near the end of the ten-year Trojan War. In Book III of the epic, King Priam of Troy casually recalls: "I went to Phrygia once, the land of vines and galloping horses, and learnt how numerous the Phrygians are when I saw the armies of Otreus and King Mygdon encamped by the river Sangarius. I was their ally and I bivouacked with them that time, and the Amazons, who fight like men, came up to attack."

But Priam didn't say how the clash ended, and gave no other details. Later, in Book VI, the Trojan warrior Glaucus boasted that his ancestor Bellerophon "killed the Amazons who go to war like men." He says nothing more about the ferocious females.

Homer's chronicle, composed around 800 BCE, ends after Achilles, champion of the besieging forces, kills Hector, chief defender of Troy. More Amazon reports were added by other Greek writers in what is now called the Epic Cycle, eight long sagas telling the whole record of the Trojan War and its aftermath.

Next in the cycle is the *Aithiopis* written around 770 BCE by Arktinos of Miletos. Only fragments of this work survive, but subsequent Greek writers recounted it in detail. His tale begins as a dozen Amazons under Queen Penthesilea arrive at Troy to help the defenders. The female phalanx rides into the fray and mows down numerous Greek attackers. But mighty Achilles rushes across the battlefield to confront Penthesilea. He kills her with a terrible spear thrust through both her and her horse. Then Achilles is overcome by feeling and falls in love with the dying queen. When a fellow Greek warrior ridicules him for it, Achilles rages blindly and kills his comrade.

Most of the Amazon squad died in combat at Troy. Various writers recorded their names as Andro, Androdaira, Bremusa, Clonie, Derimacheia, Derinoe, Evandre, Harmothoe, Otrera and Polemusa.

Another Amazon tale, told by several ancient writers, features an even-stronger killer-hero, Hercules, who was commanded in the ninth of his legendary twelve labors to obtain a renowned belt from the Amazon queen Hippolyte. One account, by Diodorus of Sicily, says that Hercules and a company of warriors sailed to the Black Sea and up the Thermodon River (in what is now northern Turkey), fabled home of the Amazons. Upon finding their city, Hercules demanded the belt, but was refused, and the strongest female fighters lined up to oppose the deadly giant. Diodorus recounts:

"The first to join battle with him was Aella, who had been given this name because of her swiftness, but she found her opponent more agile than herself. The second, Philippis, encountering a mortal blow at the very first

conflict, was slain. Then he joined battle with Prothoe, who had been victorious seven times over opponents she had challenged to battle. When she fell, the fourth whom he overcame was known as Eriboea.... The next, Celaeno, Eurybia and Phoebe...were one and all cut down as they stood shoulder to shoulder with each other. After them, Delaneira, Asteria, Marpe, Tecmessa and Alcippe were overcome.... And Hercules, after thus killing the most renowned of the Amazons and forcing the remaining multitude to turn in flight, cut down the greater number of them."

Hercules captured Antiope, sister of the queen, and gave her to King Theseus of Athens as a prize, Diodorus wrote. After the Greek intruders returned home, enraged Amazons from surrounding villages marched on Athens, seeking revenge. "They pitched their camp in what is at present called after them the Amazoneum.... Theseus joined battle with the Amazons and...gained the victory. Of the Amazons who opposed him, some he slew at the time and the rest he drove out of Attica." Antiope, who had been wed by Theseus and bore him a son, joined her husband in fighting against her former comrades, and was killed, Diodorus says. However, other ancient writers gave contradictory accounts.

In the fifth century BCE, the great historian Herodotus wrote: "When the Greeks warred with the Amazons...the story runs that, after their victory on the Thermodon, they sailed away carrying in three ships as many Amazons as they had been able to take alive; and that out at sea the Amazons set upon the crews and slew them. But they knew nothing of ships, nor how to use rudder or sail or oar...and they were borne at the mercy of waves and wind till they came to the cliffs by the Maeetian Lake." Going ashore, the women captured horses, raided the countryside, and mated with young men, Herodotus wrote.

In *The Voyage of Argo*, Apollonius of Rhodes wrote: "The Amazons of the Doeantian plain were by no means gentle, well-conducted folk. They were brutal and aggressive, and their main concern in life was war. War, indeed, was in their blood."

Hellanicus wrote in the fifth century BCE of the "golden-shielded, silver-sworded, man-loving, male-child-slaughtering Amazons." Also in that century, in *Prometheus Bound*, the tragic poet Aeschylus called them "maidens fearless in battle." He wrote of a hill near Athens "where the Amazons pitched their tents when they came with an army in spite toward Theseus and built towers against this new, lofty-towered city." Long afterward, in *The Life of Theseus*, Plutarch said of the Athens battle: "The fact that they encamped almost in the heart of the city is attested both by the names of the localities there and by the graves of those who fell in battle.... The left wing of the Amazons extended to what is now called the Amazoneum."

In the fourth century BCE, the Athenian orator Lysias wrote: "Long ago there were Amazons, daughters of Ares, who lived along the Thermodon River. They alone, of the peoples around them, were armed with iron, and they were the first to ride horses. With them, because of the inexperience of their enemies, the Amazons slew those who fled and outran those who pursued. They are accounted as men for their high courage, rather than as women for their sex, so much more did they seem to excel men in their spirit."

Many other ancient accounts tell widely varied, sometimes contradictory, Amazon tales. What was the reality behind the extensive written, painted and sculpted record? Did the oppressive male supremacy cause some strong-willed females to rebel, run away, and find their way into a she-clan? Or were the Amazons purely a male myth? Debate roiled endlessly.

Only a smattering of evidence was found through the years. Some early Greek coins bearing Amazon images have been discovered. Some Asia Minor towns claimed that they were founded by Amazons, and some had tombs purported to contain remains of the women warriors. In 1871, amateur German archeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered buried ruins in northwest Turkey that now are considered the remnants of Troy. A century later, Austrian archeologist Gerhard Poellauer grew convinced that Amazons really existed, and created the nonprofit Amazon Research Network, host of expeditions to lands around the Aegean. In the 1990s, archeologists digging in southern Russian mounds dating back to 600 BCE found female skeletons with armor and weapons. "Seven female graves contained iron swords or daggers, bronze arrowheads, and whetstones to sharpen the weapons," *Archaeology* magazine reported. "The bowed leg bones of one thirteen- or fourteen-year-old girl attest a life on horseback, and a bent arrowhead found in the body cavity of another woman suggested that she had been killed in battle."

But these findings aren't conclusive. Scholars remain divided over whether the Amazons were a male fantasy or whether they actually existed. I cannot find sufficient evidence to cause me to embrace either premise. It seems bizarre that so many Greek writers, sculptors and painters would portray Amazons if there were none. However, the riddle of the Amazons is unanswerable. Unless new archeological discoveries provide proof, the warrior women must remain one of humanity's mysteries.

Carolina's thesis contained hundreds of footnotes. She revised it frequently, with Jack's assistance. He shared her conclusion: that archeological evidence remained too skimpy for a solid answer.

As they edited her manuscript, she eyed him coyly.

"Would you like for me to be a warrior woman, armed like a gladiator? Would that turn you on?"

"God, no. You're already too much for me. I'd become impotent."

Later, under the sheets, she showed him that it hadn't happened yet.

3

Carolina and Jack finished their master's degrees, again with honors. Few of their relatives attended the January commencement, because it was a repetition of their previous graduation a year and a half earlier. Jack's divorced mother, heavy and tense, came. So did Carolina's widowed father and her older brother. After the degree ritual, everyone shared a restaurant dinner and visited the couple's small apartment.

The relatives didn't mention it, but they understood that Jack and Carolina were following the modern American mating track: first lovers, then an exclusive pair, then roommates in an unofficial marriage, and eventually, if their bond is deep and lasting, husband and wife in legal wedlock. Most of American society now approves of this guilt-free progression, although it was reviled as sinful a half-century earlier. In the 1950s, unwed sex was a crime under puritanical "fornication" laws. Hotels and landlords wouldn't rent rooms to such pairs. Other sexual taboos were intense: Birth control devices were illegal in some states. Nudity in movies and magazines was a jail offense. Even sexual language in books was criminalized by church-backed censorship laws. An unmarried girl who became pregnant was disgraced, along with her family. Divorce was hush-hush. But the Sexual Revolution wiped away the old taboos so completely that few Americans today remember them. Live-together lovers like Jack and Carolina have become common in the United States, casually accepted. Morality evolved.

As the two roamed the university campus, they saw another sign of far-reaching change: More than half of students now are female, heading for degrees that bring good-paying careers and still more freedom from the dependency that once was the lot of American women. Further cultural transformation is occurring.

"Look at the hundreds of girls everywhere," Carolina observed one day. "Males are outnumbered on campus. I was lucky to rope you in."

"No," Jack said sincerely, "I was the lucky one."

Both were accepted as doctoral candidates, and their lives changed. Classroom study was replaced by independent research and field work. They applied jointly for their first professional assignment: junior archeologists at a University Consortium dig in Thrace, the northeast tip of Greece. They were accepted and felt excited by the prospect of genuine scientific work. They closed their apartment, sold most of their belongings at a yard sale, stored their prized books and a few personal things in a friend's basement, then boarded a jet for the long overnight flight to Greece.

At Athens International Airport, they were met by their leader, Dr. Chichester, a craggy British professor whose weatherbeaten face looked as if he always was squinting into the sun. He helped stow their luggage in a Land Rover labeled "University Consortium Archeology Team" in English, Greek and Turkish. During the all-day drive northward, the professor outlined the project: An international group--he, along with four Greek students, plus two from Turkey and a chunky German postgraduate named Olga--was excavating the remains of a 400 BCE home east of Xanthe, retrieving mostly pottery fragments and bits of long-ago jewelry.

Dr. Chichester explained that the pottery was from the red-figure period in Greece's heyday of clay-baking, around 500 BCE, when elaborate painted scenes under the glaze were more lifelike than silhouettes of the earlier black-figure period. The vases and urns being unearthed were broken, but the fragments were in good condition, fitting together well. Most of the paintings displayed nude lovers or fighting warriors.

"Sex and violence intrigued ancient Greeks, just like modern Americans," Carolina observed.

In late afternoon they arrived on location. Dr. Chichester drove to the dig and introduced them to their fellow diggers, who were finishing for the day. He also introduced Zanos, a burly town policeman paid by the Consortium to keep vandals out of the Xanthe dig at night. Zanos was in his parked car, waiting to begin duty. Then the professor took them to their inn, where they had been registered as husband and wife, since this portion of Greece remained more prim than the urban south.

The following weeks were exhilarating for Carolina and Jack: sweaty digging and sifting for relics all day, then hurrying home to happy nights together. One afternoon, ten feet down in the hardened earth, the team found a pot with a common 500 BCE scene: Greek soldiers combatting Amazons. It was similar to hundreds like it on display in many museums. That night in bed, Carolina raised the old debate over whether Amazons had existed or were male fantasies.

"It's hard to believe that so many depictions would have been created if the fighter women never lived."

"Yes," Jack concurred, "but why has no direct evidence been found?"

As usual, they reached no conclusion as they sank asleep together.

The following weekend, Dr. Chichester returned to Consortium headquarters in Athens and others of the team departed for a three-day holiday. Jack and Carolina were in the mobile field office at the dig site, completing reports. The phone rang. It was Chichester with news from the Turkish antiquities ministry. Two hundred miles east of Thrace, in Turkey's old Thermodon Valley, a highway construction crew had found a buried skeleton with an engraved shield.

"The highway department roped off the spot and sent the 'dozers to work a hundred yards farther down the right-of-way," the professor said. "They posted a watchman. They can't stop the road project for long, but they're holding it until the Consortium gets someone there for a look."

As Jack scribbled notes, Chichester continued: "You and Carolina are the only ones on duty, and the closest. It's a long drive. Take the camper and the Consortium credit card, and a set of tools and two cameras and some crates for whatever you find. You won't need passports at the border crossing, but take your archeologist visas."

The couple packed quickly, filled the camper's water tank, then loaded canned food and U.S. Army surplus MREs (meals ready to eat, preserved for battlefield consumption). They found Zanos the cop and told him to guard closely until other archeologists returned. Jack and Carolina could decipher ancient Greek writing more easily than they could speak modern conversational Greek, but they coped with Zanos, crudely.

They began the lengthy journey, taking turns at the wheel: down the main highway to Alexandroupolis on the coast, back inland to the Turkish border. Like the Land Rover, the camper was labeled "University Consortium Archeology Team" in three languages, giving them conspicuous credentials wherever they went. After clearing the border station, they traveled down the isthmus to the Bosphorus and proceeded along the Black Sea highway.

At a roadside dinner break, they ate sausage-based MREs and Carolina said she understood why American soldiers call them "meals rejected by Ethiopians." They laughed, hugged, and resumed their trip.

The historic Thermodon River now is named Terme Cayi. From inland hills, it flows north into the Black Sea. Jack and Carolina reached the valley at sunset and headed upstream, but soon decided to halt for the night. At a village parking lot, they locked themselves in the camper and bundled close in the vehicle's small bed.

Next morning, they couldn't face more plastic-sealed military rations, so they breakfasted on canned fruit. Then they continued upriver, finally reaching the highway construction site. Workers and exhaust-belching machines chewed a path through the earth. A foreman scanned the camper labels, examined their archeologist visas, and took them to the roped-off discovery.

The highway excavation was along the side of a narrow valley some distance from the paved road. They drove over a dirt lane created by construction machines. The posted watchman was drowsing in a pickup truck. The bronze shield, caked with residue, had been locked in a tool shed. After photographing it, Jack and Carolina carefully slipped it into a padded box and stowed it in the camper. The foreman and watchman showed them the smallish skeleton in a fresh-dug pit eight feet below ground level. It had been mostly uncovered by highway workers. Both Carolina and Jack snapped photos. They realized that the darkened bones were ancient, and female. The pelvis was too wide and the brow too smooth to be male.

The foreman and watchman departed, leaving them to their work. The parked Consortium camper beside the excavation was like a sign proclaiming that officialdom was on the job. Jack climbed into the pit and tentatively began scooping dirt from under the bones, using his fingers,

not a sharp tool. Beneath the rib cage he felt a hard object and excitedly dug more, while Carolina snapped a photo record. Finally, in triumph, he gingerly slid out the pitted remnant of a small, ancient, iron, double-bladed battleaxe. Both he and Carolina stared at each other, aware of the growing significance of the place. Since the shield was bronze and the axe iron, this armed woman evidently had lived during the centuries-long period when Ancient Greece gradually shifted from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age.

"This is too big," she said. "Let's find a phone and get a full team in here. We shouldn't disturb things until the older pros set up a complete operation."

Jack nodded. The cell phone in the camper was useless in this remote locale, and the nearest village was five miles down the road. They photographed the axe, packed it in a slender box, and stored it by the shield in the camper. They decided that Carolina would drive back to the village and phone Dr. Chichester in Athens, so he could make arrangements with Turkish officials. Jack would remain to watch the site.

After she left, he poked around the location, studying the layers of earth. The soil was dry at this elevated edge of the valley. Along one side of the pit, barely perceptible, was the straight edge of a rock, perpendicular. Using a stick, he scraped away dirt--and his pulse pounded. It was the corner of a buried wall. Jack knew it was unprofessional to begin digging alone, but he was too excited to stop. With exceeding care, he removed the packed earth, checking each clod for possible artifacts. Slowly the shape of a stone structure emerged: a small chamber like a burial vault. When Carolina returned in the camper, he leaped from the pit, sweaty and muddy.

"God, you've gotta see what I found. Come on."

She blurted her own report: "Chichester and the Turkish officials can't be here until tomorrow. He wants us to stay in the camper by the site until they arrive."

"Okay, okay--but come look."

Jack pulled her to the pit and pointed to his discovery. She stared intently, sucking in her breath. Then she got the cameras and they snapped photos from every angle, before the light faded. They spread a

plastic tarp over the exposed skeleton as a safeguard against the unlikely chance of rain.

That evening they ate more MREs purported to be chow mein, and joked that they were less discriminating than starving Ethiopians. Then they bathed with cloths soaked from the camper's water tank, and made love in the small bed. They worried briefly that local hooligans might find the locked camper in the isolated valley, but they shrugged and slid into sleep.

Next morning they dressed fast, ate fast, and couldn't stay away from the vault. Using buckets, they carefully carried away dirt until the rectangular structure stood by itself, clearly a tomb for a single body. The stones were well-cemented and dry in the elevated location. They took more photos.

"I know what you're thinking," Carolina said. "You're dying to chisel out a stone and peek inside."

"You read my mind. But we can't. Trainees don't grab the action away from the chiefs."

In mid-afternoon, three panel trucks arrived bearing Dr. Chichester and Dr. Kamal Zotek of the Turkish Antiquities Ministry plus a research team. A video cameraman filmed everything as the leaders explored the site and crew members set up gear.

"Wonderful, wonderful," Chichester kept repeating. After consulting Zotek, he announced a plan: Carolina and Jack would remain in the camper to guard the site. He and the Turks would drive back to the coastal town where they had reserved hotel rooms. They would order a mobile field office and more campers brought to the location for a rapid dig before the highway work resumed. First and foremost, they would return in the morning to chisel open the tomb and learn its contents.

Carolina and Jack could barely sleep that night. They speculated about what might be in the vault and how it might affect their careers.

"It's probably full of mud and rotten papyrus," she muttered.

At midnight they made love again and sank into slumber. Next morning, they didn't wake until the roar of motors arrived outside the camper, as the caravan returned. They dressed hastily, grabbed bagels, and joined the assembling team. Dr. Chichester was practically bouncing

with excitement. He and Dr. Zotek decreed that removal of the skeleton would wait until after the tomb was opened.

Hammers, chisels, flashlights and storage crates were readied. Cameras, still and video, were poised to record the moment. Selected workers descended into the pit and began chipping. An upper stone forming a corner of the vault roof was first to break loose. It was lifted aside cautiously and lights were shone inside. Glints of gold and jewels reflected. A Turkish worker whooped. Glee spread through the group. More stones were removed. More lights and cameras were brought to the opening.

The find was superb. The tomb was dry and always had been. It contained a female skeleton, still wearing shreds of leather garments, surrounded by adornments collected more than two thousand years ago. In a corner, on a raised shelf, lay the greatest treasure of all: stacks of parchment filled with clear, precise writing. The parchment was folded and stitched into book-like codexes, an improvement that replaced ancient scrolls.

Chichester and Zotek clutched hands and laughed. Jack embraced Carolina intensely. Shouting and congratulations rang around the site.

The opening proceeded and calm returned. Item by item, the contents were lifted out, filmed, and stored in padded boxes. Great care was given to the parchment books, which were lifted delicately into separate containers.

Parchment is the inner layer of sheep hide, stretched tight, rubbed smooth, and dried in the sun. It is sturdy writing material, much more durable than ancient papyrus made from Egyptian reeds. Early scribes sewed parchment sections into long scrolls rolled on two handles. Codexes, or codices, were an advance, a primitive forerunner of modern books. Rectangles of parchment were placed atop each other, laced together down the middle, and folded over, making pages to be lettered on both sides. Two sheets of parchment provided eight pages, three sheets made twelve pages, and so forth.

The first hasty examination of the books revealed that the writing was ancient Attic Greek, well known to many archeologists. Carolina and

Jack had mastered it during their coursework. A codex was opened on a camp table and Chichester began scanning it.

"My God," he shouted to the group, "it's about Amazons! It seems to be the record of an Amazon colony."

All the archeologists, electrified by this apparent breakthrough, hurried to examine other volumes.

"Yes, yes, yes," Dr. Zotek yelled, looking up from his codex. "It's a scribe's description of Amazon events."

Jack and Carolina found similar writing in the codex they opened. Elation filled the team a second time. Everyone sensed the unfolding of a major scientific discovery: the first solid evidence of an actual Amazon group.

Much urgent work needed to be done. After more consultations, Dr. Chichester announced a plan: He would remain at the Consortium camper to supervise a rapid dig for additional findings. Jack and Carolina would return with the Turkish team to Ankara, where they would live in a university dorm and help catalog the marvels of the Thermodon trove. The codex pages would be photographed, translated, and shared with scholarly research journals in every nation.

It was done. Carolina and Jack entered a new phase of their careers, working daily with experts at Ankara University, improving their language skills, returning happily to their dormitory apartment each night. The project stretched into months. They postponed their return to America and work on their doctorates. Also, they were married: by a government clerk, since neither bushy-bearded Orthodox priests nor Muslim mullahs would perform the holy rite for foreign infidels. The excitement of their landmark work mingled with their joy as newlyweds.

The codexes were an archeological blockbuster. Carbon dating fixed the parchment before 250 BCE, the oldest ever found. Previously, scholars had concluded that sheepskin hadn't been used as a writing material that early. And it was a breakthrough to find it bound in codex form, a development that didn't become widespread until later. But the greatest impact of the Thermodon find was its documentation that fighting female Amazons truly had existed, that they weren't figments of ancient Greek male imagination. The writings showed that escaping Greek slave

women and concubines fled to Amazon life via a clandestine network of "safe houses" similar to the Underground Railroad that helped runaway American slaves flee north in the 1800s.

Release of the Thermodon news caused a surge of excitement in the public media. Newspaper and magazine reports gushed. Television crews filmed the Ankara researchers at work and also flocked to the Thermodon dig, where the most remarkable additional find was twenty-six more female skeletons lying side-by-side with their arms folded, evidently a mass burial after a massacre.

When the wave of publicity faded and the flurry of scholarly journal articles ceased, Carolina and Jack undertook a special project. They carefully edited the codex translations into modern language as a book for the general public. Their systematic chronology began with a biography left by the scribe who wrote the ancient documents. The complete story is now offered to the non-academic world. The following chapters contain the two-millennia-old writing of the Thermodon scribe.

4

I am Melos, of the village Aegolus, a day's walk from Kavopolis, northernmost city of the Greeks. My father was a laborer on the great farm of the Octavola family in a wide green valley surrounded by low hills. The rich Octovalas owned our village and all its homes, fields, barns, horse teams, cattle, and even its outdoor shrine with two sacrifice altars, one to Zeus, one to Apollo.

The Overseer, an Octavola cousin, ruled our village and lived in its largest home. Within his walled domain he had several slaves to serve his wife and children, and he enjoyed two young concubines purchased from a bordello in Kavopolis. The Overseer, a square man with a jutting jaw, governed Aegolus like a king. All townspeople deferred to him.

My home had no slaves. I lived in a mud-straw house with my father, mother, sisters and Aunt Cloethe, whose husband had been killed in the war with the Thessalonians. The women cooked outside our rear doorway and laundered clothing in the creek at the back of our courtyard. They couldn't leave our enclosure unescorted, but we village boys roamed everywhere, swimming in creek pools, catching salamanders, hurling rocks with homemade slings, and exploring where we liked.

On some evenings my father took me to the open-air shrine with its painted wooden statues of the two gods under a decorated roof. The priest, who was also the village's chief plowman, sacrificed goats, sheep, pigs and occasionally dogs on altars beside the shrine, while all the men prayed to Zeus or Apollo for a good harvest, and some prayed for cures for ailments. During the sacrifices, the priest wore an ornate vestment and headdress. Helpers held the bleating animals on the altar. As I watched him ceremoniously plunge a decorated knife into a helpless creature, I cringed. It upset me, even though all the village men nodded and chanted in approval. Sometimes the sacrifices were burned and the men ate parts of the cooked meat.

Our green valley had little contact with the outside world, except when Octavola relatives arrived on horseback to visit the Overseer or

when our chief harvester hauled wagonloads of vegetables, wine, cheese, wheat and other produce to Kavopolis for sale. After one trip, the harvester returned with news that the mighty ruler Alexander, who conquered the Persians and all other kingdoms, had died at only thirty-three years of age. But such affairs of state were remote from us, except for the conscription of some village youths as Greek warriors, most of whom never returned.

I was small in stature, but I began working in the fields alongside my father at age six and by ten was considered a full laborer. Occasionally we hoed and raked with my grandfather or my two uncles, also Aegolus field hands. The men often visited our home or met Father and me during sacrifices at the shrine. But their women remained invisible within their homes, in keeping with custom. I listened to the men discuss many things. They said some other Greek farms used slaves for labor, but the Octavolas preferred to hire freemen, thus avoiding the cost of armed guards and the risk of a slave uprising.

"Besides," Uncle Kartos said sourly, "they pay us so little that we are barely above slaves."

In spare hours I helped Grandfather with chores such as repairing the leaky thatch of his roof. He was a wise old man who taught me wonders of nature. We discussed the perfect patterns of spiderwebs, and the delicious smell of sassafras roots, and rainbows that appear only on rainy days when the sun emerges behind you, and the playful habits of otters raising their babies in creekbank burrows. He pointed out the faithfulness of male and female duck pairs swimming side by side. In the dark, on the creekbank, he showed me foxfire, the mysterious glow in rotting logs.

To record the seasons, Grandfather and I watched the shadow of the porch roof on the outer wall of his home. When the shadow reached its lowest point on the wall--at midsummer, the longest day, when the sun was highest--we marked the shadow's location by scratching a notch in the wall. When the shadow reached its high point--at midwinter, the shortest day, when the sun was lowest--we did likewise. Thereafter, we observed the progression of the year by watching the roof shadow migrate upward and downward between the notches.

Grandfather explained the cycle of the moon: The new moon begins as a sliver in the western sky after sunset, then grows thicker and more easterly each successive night, until it becomes a full disk in the east, then fades again. Each cycle requires nearly thirty days, and recurs more than a dozen times a year. The moon's travels are contrary: she moves westward across the sky each night, but appears more easterly each evening while waxing.

Grandfather taught me to find the North Star, the only heavenly object that doesn't move; it remains fixed while the rest of the night sky slowly wheels around it. He also showed me the strange exceptions: five traveling stars that move across the others randomly, following the path of the sun and moon. We pondered these things as marvels.

At age eight, my religious instruction commenced. On holy days we village boys sat in rows by the shrine while the assistant priest explained the Pantheon. We memorized the Sacred Truths: The primordial gods created the heavens and earth. Gaea the Earth Goddess mated with her son Uranus and bore the Titan gods. Kronos, king of the Titans, castrated his father Uranus to prevent other sons from being born, rivals for the throne. Then Kronos ate his own children to prevent them from usurping his power. One of his sons, Zeus, escaped and led other gods in overthrowing the Titans. Zeus castrated Kronos and became king of gods atop Mount Olympus. Some gods fought each other, murdered each other, seduced each other, raped each other, devoured each other, and occasionally impregnated human women.

The Sacred Truths were awesome. We boys shook our heads at the fearful behavior of invisible deities. Our teacher explained that if we prayed fervently and burned sacrifices to please the gods, they would favor us with abundant lives and victory in war. We were required to memorize prayers and recite as follows:

"Mighty Zeus, nature's great Sovereign, ruling all by law, from Thee was our begetting; ours alone, of all that live and move upon the earth, the lot to bear God's likeness. For Thee, this whole vast cosmos, wheeling round the earth, obeys. Zeus, thou giver of every gift, who dwellest within the dark clouds, wielding the flashing stroke of lightning, save, we pray, Thy children from this boundless misery. Scatter, O Father, the darkness from our souls."

We were instructed to chant the prayers each night before bed. I did so, at first. But after a few nights, I felt uncertain. I decided to pray harder, more earnestly. Yet questions crowded into my mind, making me feel awkward as I chanted. Eventually I stopped praying at home at night.

Many evenings, I had time with other boys. When I was twelve, I was befriended by the Overseer's son, Rectus, age fourteen, who lived only a few paces from my home. We climbed hills, hunted hares with our slings, and talked for hours. Although Rek lived with wealth, servants and a tutor--and was learning to read, a skill unknown to common villagers--he treated me as an equal. Even though he was larger and stronger, he didn't tease me for my smallness as other village boys did. We became best friends.

I told Rek of the nature marvels I had learned from Grandfather. How strange it is, we agreed, that five stars don't remain fixed in the rotating sky, but move across, following the line traversed by the moon.

"My tutor says they are the wanderers, called planets," Rek related.

As we watched the night sky wheel slowly around the North Star, we learned to note the passage of the night by the changing positions of star figures. To track daytime, we fashioned a sundial similar to one at the Overseer's mansion, and watched the shadow of a stick tell the progression of the day.

I told Rek my concern about religion: "Do you think Zeus really wants goats and sheep stabbed to death on his altar, beside his statue, then burned? Why would He want that? If I were a god, I can't imagine that it would give me pleasure."

Rek nodded. "When my uncle visited from Kavopolis, he told of a great sacrifice to Eirene, the peace goddess. Eighty oxen were slain. Father said it was a waste of good draft animals, because it didn't bring peace. Greeks always are at war."

We pondered in silence. Then Rek added:

"My tutor says that long ago, they didn't just sacrifice animals, they sacrificed children."

"That's horrible!"

We shook our heads. We agreed to keep these thoughts to ourselves, lest the priest-plowman have us flogged at prayer time. Men of the village seemed grimly serious about religion.

"Do girls and women discuss such things as traveling stars and sacrificed goats?" I asked Rek.

"Of course not. My father says women can't think. That's why they never are taught, but stay home to cook and raise babies."

I mulled it over, unsure.

"My sister Tabina did something smart," I said. "After the women washed our clothing in the creek, they had trouble hanging the wet garments on high tree branches to dry. So Tabby made a long leather rope and put it over a limb. She hung laundry on it and pulled it up into the tree."

Rek shrugged, unimpressed.

We discussed the fascinating topic of sex and women's bodies. From older boys we had learned the fundamentals, but knew little else. The subject both tantalized and embarrassed us.

I began to notice differences in people. Some families are solemnly pious and their men pray daily at the shrine, while others enjoy laughter, wine-drinking and amusement-seeking. Among the latter, a clear example was Dolanther, the chief horse wrangler, who had a booming laugh. He lived at the outskirts of our village beside the creek. While other women stayed hidden within households, gossip spread that Dolanther sometimes permitted his wife and daughters to slip to the creek and bathe nude. I hid in bushes by the creek to observe, but no women appeared and I felt ashamed for peeping.

One evening Rek could barely contain himself. He had exciting news: he had crossed the magic threshold. For Rek's fifteenth birthday, his father had sent the younger concubine to his bedchamber to show him the ways of love. I was spellbound.

"It was wonderful," Rek said. "Her round breasts and smooth thighs made me wild. I kept her in my bed until I was exhausted. I don't know when she left, but I woke this morning alone."

I complained: "I'll never know what it's like. My home has no concubines."

Thereafter Rek regaled me with occasional reports about nights with his father's possession. I felt left out. He had advanced to manhood while I remained a boy.

Another time, Rek brought different news: His father had purchased two slave girls--sisters with rhyming names, Litha and Mitha--who had been captured from northern Slavs. They looked strange, with light-brown hair, Rek said. The younger, Litha, may be heading for trouble, he said, because she has defiance in her face, not displaying proper subservience.

Rek was right. Soon afterward, the village was abuzz because the Overseer ordered Litha flogged outside his gate for insubordination. Two big male slaves dragged her out, bound by leather straps, and forced her to kneel. While we boys and other villagers watched, the slaves began whipping her with slender poles. She shrieked. The Overseer commanded: "Careful! No scars. I want her unblemished in my bed." So they flailed the screaming girl with a degree of restraint.

I shuddered at each lash, then uncontrollably yelled "NO!" All eyes in the crowd looked at me. I felt clumsy, wondering if I had disgraced my family. The big slaves dragged the girl back inside the gate.

The flogging was the talk of the village for days. But then came more stunning news: One night, when the Overseer ordered Litha to his bed, she stabbed him in the abdomen with a food knife, nearly killing him. Then she and her sister fled into the dark with a donkey they secretly had laden with food in advance.

"They've gone to join the Amazons," Aunt Cloethe said.

"The who?" I asked.

"The Amazons. The runaway women. The rebel women. The fighter women."

I thought I detected a tinge of admiration in her voice. I had never heard of Amazons. "But how can the sisters find them? Where do they live?"

"Nobody knows," my aunt replied. "They attack, then vanish, and soldiers cannot track them."

The following evening, Rek said his father was feverish and in pain, but was expected to survive his knife wound. I recounted Cloethe's remark about Amazons. Rek said his family owned a painted vase from Athens with pictures of Greek warriors fighting the female warriors.

"My father says they are sneak-attackers who raid caravans in the night, then disappear with the loot: horses, wagons and everything. Warriors are sent to find them but they return empty-handed. And sometimes they don't return at all."

We felt amazed. Compared to the submissive, housebound, unseen, silent women of our village, the notion of female warriors seemed incredible.

Soon, conscriptors from Kavopolis returned to choose more Aegolus youths for the army. The Octavola owners had agreed that the military could take unmarried young men from their farm, but not married ones. The Octavolas were wise in business, and did not want the burden of supporting young widows and orphans left by deceased soldiers. Besides, everyone knew that single young males, full of brash aggression, make the most fearless fighters.

The conscriptors picked large, strapping youths, but shook their heads at me. Only the brawny were chosen to swing swords and throw javelins.

I felt puny and worthless. I seemed destined to spend my life as a field hand, like many village boys. But my father had higher hopes.

5

As Rek learned from his tutor, he showed me how to make some Greek letters and to spell my name. I practiced this strange craft, using a stick to mark in clay. My father saw it and a dream formed in his mind.

"You might become a scribe," he said proudly. "It would be a career of high status. Scribes don't sweat in the dirt all their lives or die on battlefields. They are privileged, serving the elite."

Unfortunately, I knew little except the dozen letters that Rek had taught me. Few among our village's farm workers had ever seen written words. But my father was determined. After the Overseer recovered sufficiently to resume watching over field work, Father humbly petitioned him. In glowing terms he praised my intelligence and said I was clever in speech. Father pointed out that Rek was fond of me and had begun teaching me words.

The Overseer promised to make inquiries among his Octavola cousins, as soon as one made a horseback visit to the farm. Later Rek told me that he encouraged his father on my behalf.

As we awaited a response to our request, my family discussed my future. Father proudly described how I would live among high officials, military commanders, priests, Assembly members, even princes, recording their important decrees. As he spoke, the women were quiet and I noticed Tabina watching me with jealousy in her eyes. Later, my sister, a year younger than I, spoke to me privately.

"Boys have exciting lives, while I have nothing."

"But, Tabby, that's the Greek way. Don't worry, you will have a good home."

"Not really. I'll be a possession. In two years, Father will find some old lecher and pay him a dowry to take me. Then I'll belong to him like a servant."

"Father loves you. He won't marry you to someone unkind."

"Maybe, but he can't afford much dowry."

"Be patient. Father will make sure your life is good."

Tabina brooded in silence, then continued:

"You can go into the world and find adventures, but we girls are prisoners. We must do what men command."

Her bitterness impressed me. This was the first time she had shown me such feelings. It made me pause and reflect on the ways of the world. Finally I answered:

"You're right, it's unfair. But I don't know what anyone can do about it."

She grinned bitterly at me.

"Maybe I'll run off and join the wild Amazons."

We both smiled ruefully and I hugged her.

* * *

Just before my fifteenth birthday, the happy news arrived. I was accepted to study among apprentices of the high scribe of Kavopolis. The Overseer provided an Octavola medallion for me to carry as the family's mark of approval upon me. On the morning of my departure, Mother and my sisters helped me pack clothing and food. Tabina looked both proud and resentful as she waved goodbye. Father and Uncle Kartos accompanied me to the edge of Aegolus, then I walked beside the chief harvester as he hauled a wagonload of beans to the city.

For the first time in my life, I left the shelter of my boyhood home. The village became tiny behind us, then vanished. In late afternoon we approached the much-discussed city. I was awed by the great walls, tall buildings and bustle of crowds. On an overlooking knoll, but safely within the city's protective walls, stood the palace of the prince.

I went to the governing temple, a looming edifice where many men worked. The chief scribe, a graying man with penetrating eyes and wisdom in his face, had quarters behind the temple. He examined my medallion, welcomed me, and introduced me to his two assistants.

The high scribe had studied the latest writing methods in Athens and had imparted the knowledge to his assistants. I joined a half-dozen

apprentices living in upstairs rooms. We slept on straw pallets, ate meals with temple workers, and used the public latrine on the riverbank. No woman or girl was ever seen.

Slowly I entered the enchanted realm of written words. I memorized the rest of the alphabet and learned how the letters spell out spoken sounds. It seemed amazing that a person's speech can be put down as symbols, then read aloud again, going from sounds to images and back to sounds.

While the high scribe was busy in temple meetings or with duties at the palace, his assistants taught us our new craft. We were instructed to make ink from lamp soot mixed with gum tree sap. And to make pens from hollow reeds, which exude the correct amount of ink when squeezed properly. And to print neat letters on sheets of papyrus woven from Egyptian reeds, then dry the wet writing in the sun.

For the most permanent records, we were taught to make parchment from sheepskin. At the slaughterhouse, where sheared sheep were cut up for mutton, butchers saved the hides for the scribe. We peeled off the inner layer, scraped it smooth, washed it, and stretched it on a frame to dry in the sunshine. It became a sturdy writing material. Although most Greek scribes sew parchment into long strips for scrolls, our mentor had devised something better: We were taught to place several layers atop each other, lace them down the center and fold them over, making pages that can contain much writing.

As my skills improved, the high scribe entrusted me to record minor accounts from temple officials. Eventually I was allowed to write major statements by priests and assemblymen. Thus I was privy to important happenings of the region.

From time to time I recorded reports of Amazon attacks. Sometimes a caravan was raided in the night, its armed guards driven off and its riches stolen. Sometimes a Greek village was hit and its granary looted of food. Greek warriors were sent after the female rebels but never found them.

Warfare and militarism reigned supreme to Greeks. Victorious warriors were public heroes. Much of my writing was patriotic declarations. I transcribed the glowing words of magistrates as they praised the valor of brave Kavopolis warriors after victories against

surrounding enemies. Every assemblyman spouted tributes to the courage of "our finest young men, the glory of our homeland, the band of brothers serving their country selflessly," or similar words.

Vaguely I had a sense of something amiss. As I wrote the patriotic praise, I envisioned the fighters splitting skulls with battleaxes and thrusting javelins through intestines. I could hear the screams and see the gushing blood and death shudders. If many of our young men were slaughtered but more of the enemy died, it was hailed as a triumph. It seemed horrible to me, yet all the city's leaders saluted the nobility of combat. It would have been unpatriotic to do otherwise. I didn't dare voice my doubts, even to other apprentices.

Once in a Kavopolis square, I heard a bard reciting Homer to a circle of boys and middle-aged men. He told of the Trojan War. For ten long years, Greeks lay siege to the walled city, fighting clashes that left multitudes dead, all because of a love affair. A decade of war ravaged the land because Prince Paris stole beautiful Helen, wife of a Spartan king. Thousands were killed for one ruler's sexual jealousy. As they slew each other, the Greeks felt noble patriotism and the Trojans felt noble patriotism. The bard recited the gore in rhapsodic tones, full of admiration.

I felt out of step with everyone around me. Just as I couldn't understand sacrificing goats to Zeus or flogging slave girls, I couldn't understand glorifying war. But I kept my thoughts to myself, even as I was transferred to military duty.

When I was sixteen, I was assigned to be both scribe and courier in the combat unit of fearless Commander Malgon. I wrote his reports and messages, carrying them to appropriate officials. In the second month of my new work, our squad was ordered on a search-and-destroy mission, to find and eliminate Amazons making brazen raids near the Black Sea. We set off with full armor and a wagon bearing food for two months.

Thus began the violent drama that forever changed my life.

6

Commander Malgon's squad contained five horseback lancers, ten archers and fifteen foot-soldiers, plus the cook and supply wagon. And Malgon's young lieutenant. And me, the scribe. It was a small unit, but more than enough to defeat a band of soft women, Malgon told the troops with a laugh.

After five days' march, we reached the shore of the wine-dark Black Sea, which spread like a leaden plain to the vanishing horizon. I had never seen an ocean and was thrilled. We circled our tents and campfires near the beach. Archers killed a deer in the scrubby woodland and we enjoyed venison.

Four days later, we reached the Thermodon River and turned up its green valley. The summer grew hotter and we dripped with sweat. In the evening, we camped on the riverbank and cooled ourselves in the water. When warriors draw near to combat, they bathe as often as possible to prevent festering of any cuts suffered in the clash of arms.

The soldiers, large men muscled from constant training, treated me as the group's mascot. The chief lancer said loudly by the fire:

"Melos, when we attack the Amazons, you can stab them with your reed pen."

The others laughed, but not cruelly.

That night, sentries were posted at two points. Because of the heat, most of the men spread their bedrolls in the open air, leaving their tents in the wagon. As usual, I slept in a corner of the great command tent along with Malgon and his lieutenant. The silence of the warm night seemed comforting. The campfires cast a flickering glow. All was serene.

After midnight, terrible shrieks and crashes startled me awake. Thuds and shouts echoed through the camp. As I sat upright, two women warriors burst into the tent, swinging small two-bladed battleaxes. Commander Malgon was beheaded as he reached for his sword. The lieutenant tried to run but died of a savage chop in the back. The women

turned toward me. I pulled up a shield and felt severe pain in my legs. They jerked away the shield and one raised her axe for a death blow. Then they saw that I was a youth, not a soldier.

"Save him among the slaves," one said in perfect Greek, and they rushed back outside to join the fighting.

The battle noises ended quickly. I could hear the women calling to each other, asking if any had been injured. They all spoke Greek. I heard final blows and groans as they finished off wounded soldiers.

I tried to rise but couldn't. I had been slashed across my knees. Blood flowed down my legs. The pain was intense. Three women entered the tent and pulled me out by a campfire. They tied leather thongs around my thighs to stop the bleeding. They tied my hands behind me and left me by the fire.

Soon afterward, they dragged a wounded soldier and dumped him on the ground beside me. He was a junior officer named Dalien, a proud son of a rich family. Speared in the thigh, he panted from the pain. The women likewise tied his hands behind him.

As daylight came, we saw a ghastly scene of death. Greek warriors lay sprawled everywhere, covered with gore. Amazons collected the soldiers' armor and weapons, and even stripped off their clothes. One Greek, still alive, was speared. Their naked bodies were dragged to the riverbank and shoved into the water, where the men had been happily swimming a few hours before. I saw the corpses of the two sentries, who had been killed silently just before the nighttime attack. I felt a sick pang for all my comrades.

One Amazon had been killed by sword thrust during the doomed Greek resistance. Another had been stabbed in the side. Both the dead and wounded women were brought to the campfire where Dalien and I lay. Amazons bandaged their wounded comrade and told her she soon would heal.

"You're tough as an ox," one teased her. "You'll be fighting again in a month."

The women brought the brigade's supply wagon and all the unit's horses, which had been tethered in nearby grass. They loaded the wagon with spoils from the raid: weapons, tents, food, and even the bloody

garments of the dead warriors. The booty hung down all sides of the supply vehicle. Then they heaved Dalien and me inside, and carefully lifted in the dead Amazon and the wounded one.

The procession moved out, heading up the Thermodon Valley. Looking back, we could barely detect where the Greek brigade had perished, except for scorched spots of the campfires.

Dalien and I, both in pain, clenched our teeth as the lurching wagon jolted along the terrain. The Amazon's corpse occasionally jostled against us. One hard bounce flung her face against mine, and I pushed her away quickly. Her dead eyes, half open, seemed to look at me. It was disturbing, so I reached cautiously and closed her eyelids. At the opposite side of the wagon, the wounded Amazon breathed tensely in pain, groaning at sharp jolts.

After a while, our entourage came to a side-valley overgrown densely with thorns. It looked like an impenetrable jungle, desolate of human life. We stopped and the lead Amazons walked to the edge of a cliff, pulling back branches to reveal a lane along the face of the rocks. They waved to a sentry standing on a ledge above the cliff. After we entered the hidden pathway, two young Amazons stayed behind and swept the ground with leafy branches, removing tracks that might show where the troop had entered.

We passed through the thorn thicket and came to an amazing sight: an Amazon village with women everywhere. Some bathed naked in a dammed creek. Others worked at fields and buildings, overseeing male slaves. Small girls scampered around. As we approached, women came running from every direction. The warrior leader announced to them:

"We destroyed the Greek troop in the night. We killed them all, except two wounded ones we will add to our slaves. We took all their armor and equipment and food."

Cheers arose. Then the leader added: "Sylene was killed and Celeste was wounded." Silence fell. Women came to the supply wagon, lifted Celeste out, tended her wounds and carried her to her quarters. They carried Sylene's body to a burial place on a knoll.

"Send three slaves to dig her grave," the warrior chief commanded.

Dalien and I couldn't walk, so we were pulled by our arms to a squat mud-straw building that we later learned was the slave quarters. We were taken to a room and dumped onto sheepskin pallets filled with straw. With our hands still bound behind us, we sank into exhausted sleep.

Next morning, two girls about ten years old brought us bread and goat milk. They untied our hands and left us to eat. Later two older girls pulled us outside the doorway and washed our wounds with water from a pot. As we sat there, helpless, a full-bodied woman with a commanding air arrived and told us:

"I am Hella, the Home Queen. You are slaves, captured by Saria, the War Queen. In our village, you will have the same rights that women have in Greek towns. You will work all day as commanded. You will be fed, and sleep in the slave building. When you are ordered to come to a woman's bed at night to give her pleasure, you will bathe and do as you are told, just as women do in Greek homes. But you may not bathe in the large pool with our Amazons. Use the smaller one downstream.

"You must defer to us and always say 'my lady,' even to the young girls. We teach them they are worthy of respect. Any insolence or disobedience by you will be punished swiftly. All our slaves have been wounded and cannot run far. If you attempt to escape, you will be hunted down by our warriors on horseback, with tracking dogs, and you will not be brought back alive."

The Home Queen started to leave, but turned back to me.

"You are too small to be a warrior."

"I was the troop's scribe."

She pondered. "Good. Saria often wishes that we could record our history, but our village never has contained a person with knowledge of written words. She may put your skills to work."

After she left, the girls brought us crutches made from forked saplings and helped us hobble in pain to the slave latrine pit behind the building. Our wounds had stopped bleeding, but we were helpless.

As we lay by the doorway, an Amazon warrior arrived with a water pot and a heap of bloody clothing.

"This is your first slave duty: While your wounds heal, you will wash these garments from your unfortunate comrades, so that we may reuse the cloth."

Dalien and I stared at each other, insulted by the command. We hesitated, but she drew her sword and pointed it at Dalien's face. Grudgingly, we began dunking the garments into the pot. After she left, we discussed our bizarre circumstances. Dalien, who wore arrogance gained from a life of privilege, was bitter.

"I will not be their slave," he said. "The bitches killed our commander and all our friends, and now they make us clean the spoils from their very bodies."

I didn't answer. He looked at me. "Well?"

"You're right," I said, then added: "But we would have done the same to them. If our mission had succeeded, any survivors would have been taken home in chains and put into bondage."

Dalien glowered: "They are enemies! You aren't a soldier and cannot understand patriotism. I took an oath to fight to the death against Greece's enemies. I will not be their slave."

He was correct. I felt ashamed for being disloyal to my people. We fell into silence as we worked.

Dalien added: "If captured, we soldiers have a duty to escape. As soon as I heal enough to walk--" He didn't finish.

All day we worked alone at the slave quarters. At evening, a dozen sweat-soaked male slaves hobbled home from the fields where they had worked. Nearly all walked with canes. They greeted us as newcomers to their sorry lot. A grizzled slave with a leg missing below the knee lurched up on a crutch and welcomed us.

"What a broken-down pair you are," he teased, shaking his head. "You'll fit right in, here in gimp-land."

The others laughed. He continued:

"The Amazons keep only slaves with busted legs, who can't run away. My name is Octos. I was in a brigade from Kilkis, but we were ambushed five years ago and a horse fell on me, taking off my leg. Ever since, I've been working for the Amazons, sitting down on the job."

Other slaves introduced themselves. Soon, young girls arrived with pots of soup and loaves of bread. We ate, sitting in a circle outside the doorway. We talked all evening, trading our stories. From the longtime slaves we learned many things about our captors and slave life, as follows:

The Amazons speak Greek because nearly all of them were Greek slaves or concubines who ran away from stern male masters. New runaways arrive randomly, increasing the female population.

The community has two leaders: the War Queen who trains the warriors and leads their raids, and the Home Queen who governs the farming and cooking and weaving wool from a sheep flock in the hills. Several senior Amazons join the queens in a ruling council.

The warriors are the top Amazons, heroes of the colony, outranking the home girls who cook, sew, tend sheep, bake bread, milk goats, and perform other domestic chores.

"When new runaways come here, the biggest and strongest become fighters under the War Queen," Octos related. "The warriors take a blood oath to die for each other. They train constantly until they're tough like iron. They're damn fine archers, and they kill deer in the hills to feed us all. New women who are too small are assigned to work for the Home Queen."

A long-bearded slave named Ankus related that the village is full of loot from caravans raided by the wild women. About 20 stolen wagons are parked under trees. The horses become mounts for the Amazon cavalry. Finery and goods of all sorts are stashed in the Amazon quarters.

"They don't need to smelt metals, or tan leather for saddles, or make pottery," he said, "because they take all those things from unlucky caravans."

Male slaves mostly work in the fields growing food, Ankus said. A few others dig clay from a downstream creekbank, mix it with straw, shape it into bricks, and dry them in sunshine. Finished bricks are carried to construction sites where new rooms are added to buildings. Slaves also press oil from olives in the grove, pick grapes from the vineyard for wine, harvest wheat in autumn, and perform other village labor. At the

bakery they grind the wheat in a great stone bowl, soak it into dough and bake it in wood-fired ovens.

Ankus, who wore a keen look of intelligence, analyzed:

"Concealment is the Amazon secret of survival. If Greek legions found this place, they could wipe it out swiftly. But the women always brush away their tracks when they enter or leave the valley. Sometimes, when they aren't pulling captured wagons, they ride further up the Thermodon to leave false tracks, then double back in the edge of the river, to leave no trail. They take an oath swearing that if they're ever captured and tortured, they won't reveal the location of their secret hideout, or they will tell a false location far away."

Old Octos leered at us with lechery.

"The women bathe naked in the pool every evening," he said. "Then they sing around a bonfire. But that isn't the best part. While a few Amazons take younger women as their lovers, the rest summon us slaves to their beds at night, just like rich Greek men calling their concubines. Even an old one-legger like me gets a lot of night work." He winked at us. "The life of a slave isn't all bad"

I was intrigued by the thought of being a bed-slave, but Dalien looked resentful.

"Don't the women become pregnant?" I asked.

"Occasionally," Octos replied. "They keep the girl babies and send the boys off in a wagon at night to an old woman who lives alone outside a village down the valley. She knows slave traders who buy the boys. An Amazon once told me: 'Since you Greeks value boys more than girls, we send you our boys, and good riddance.'"

"One more thing," Octos added, watching our reactions. "These Amazons are goddess-worshipers, and you'll probably be ordered to perform holy copulation."

"What?" Darien snarled. The burly slave continued:

"Behind the warrior dormitory is a shrine to three goddesses: Hera, Aphrodite and Artemis the huntress. It has three painted wooden statues and three altars. Before they go on a raid, the Amazons sacrifice

a lamb, thinking this will persuade the goddesses to protect them. It's done by a tall priestess named Eila.

"Well, Eila is a lusty one, and she has a sex ritual. Every full moon, they put a raised platform in front of the Aphrodite statue, with a pallet on it. Torches are lit around it. The Amazons gather in a circle. Eila puts on an Aphrodite mask and strips naked. They take one of us slaves, put an Eros mask on us, strip us too, and make us service the priestess on the platform. Eros and Aphrodite have a tumble in the torchlight."

Octos grinned broadly. "If that doesn't give you religion, I don't know what will."

Chuckles followed. Octos added: "The full-moon ceremony puts most of the Amazons in an eager mood, and nearly every slave gets called to a bed on those nights. When that time of month arrives, we call it the Amazon Moon. You'll soon learn that the Amazon Moon is the hottest sex season."

I grinned at Dalien, but he still looked resentful.

Ankus, the thoughtful one, added seriously: "However, the real Amazon Moon is when they raid in the moonlight, striking out of the dark, catching caravan guards or weary soldiers asleep. There's blood on the moon, those nights. The Amazons are night-fighters. They may look like your little sister or your fetching cousin, but they can be deadly. Don't forget it."

Darkness had fallen. Our motley group, the limping slaves of gimp-land, hobbled inside to our pallets. I fell asleep to an odd thought: Nearly half of the people in Greece are slaves. Young men like me dream of growing rich and owning bondservants, especially female ones. But it never occurred to me that the opposite might happen: that I would be owned by females.

7

For the next few days, while the other male slaves were sent each morning to the crop fields or the brick pit, Dalien and I were left by the doorway to recline at half-labor while our wounds healed. We finished scrubbing the bloody garments and spread them on bushes to dry in the sun.

Soon I was able to rise on my crutches unaided and move about. I saw that the secret Amazon valley was a small paradise. Delicate ferns spread green lace along the creekbanks. The dammed pool was clear, lined with smooth stones. A grove of fig trees dotted one hillside and olive trees another. A large grape arbor filled an elevated plateau. Up the valley, I heard bleating goats. A pasture contained more than twenty horses that had been seized from caravans and conquered military squads. In the distance, I could see a wheat field and a large bean patch. Here and there, wildflowers splashed color.

One of the buildings contained the village's bakery. Sweet-smelling woodsmoke rose from its vent, but the most wonderful smell was the rich aroma of fresh bread.

Mostly I watched the women come and go. I strained my eyes to see the nude ones splashing in the pool. I saw the warriors, girded with weapons, train strenuously on a hillside each morning, then dive into the pool to wash away their sweat. And I saw the home women go to and fro, performing their daily chores. One warrior was a tall black Nubian. Most of the others had the pale skin and jet black hair of Aegean people.

As I watched, a passing Amazon stood out because her hair glistened like honey. I recognized her as Litha, the Slavic slave who was whipped at Aegolus. She looked glowing and attractive.

"My lady," I called, "I know you. I was outside the Overseer's house on the day you were flogged."

She looked me up and down, quizzically, then recognition flashed in her face.

"You're the boy who yelled 'no.'"

"Yes." I felt embarrassed. "It just popped out of me. My name is Melos." Then I added: "The Overseer didn't die."

"Too bad," she blurted, then reversed herself: "No, I'm glad. But he learned a lesson."

"Do you have scars?" I asked.

"No, but I'll bet the Overseer does," she joked. Then she added: "My sister Mitha is here too. And there is the Overseer's donkey." She pointed to a burro grazing among horses in the pasture.

She didn't treat me as a slave, so I felt I could speak openly. I was puzzled. "How did you find this place, when Greek warriors cannot?"

She eyed me carefully, hesitating. "I am not supposed to say."

"Please! I'm curious."

"Slave women and concubines have secrets that we confide to each other."

"Secrets?"

She looked around to make sure nobody heard us.

"I guess it is safe to tell you, since you will never leave this village. There are hidden places where runaway women can find help."

"How? Where?"

"Homes with two vines."

"What? Tell me."

She took a breath, looked around again, and explained:

"A few women--mostly widows living alone, supported only by their gardens--provide a secret pathway for women escaping from bondage. On the sides of their homes, they place two pots with vines hanging down. Townspeople don't notice them among other flowers, but they are a code sign to women who are brave enough to run. Mitha and I traveled through forests and peered at villages until we saw the two vines. Then at night we went to the refuge homes and were sheltered. At the final home, an old woman hid us until Amazons came in the night and got us."

Remember, don't tell anyone I revealed the secret, or I might get in trouble."

I promised sincerely.

She saw another fair-haired young woman approaching, a bit larger and older, and waved her to us.

"Mitha is training to be a warrior," Litha said. "I'm proud of my big sister." To Mitha, she explained: "This is Melos, from Aegolus. He's the boy who yelled 'no' when I was whipped."

Mitha began to greet me but hesitated, unsure how to address a slave. After an awkward moment, she excused herself and went on her way.

Litha lingered a bit longer, then smiled and left.

I thought she was beautiful.

8

"Melos, you cannot understand the natural order of masters and servants, because you are from a peasant family. You have not been educated by learned tutors like the sons of great families."

Dalien spoke earnestly, without seeming arrogant, as we lounged on the creek bank after dinner. Nonetheless, I felt annoyed and groped for a way to rebut my rich young friend. Oblivious, he continued:

"My tutor, Sycophantus, studied in Athens at the great Lyceum headed by Aristotle, who also taught Alexander the Great. Aristotle explained clearly how the laws of nature empower men to rule over women and owners to rule over slaves. It is perfectly normal, written into the fabric of life.

"The farmer rules his cattle and swine because he is superior to them. The farmer is a natural master and his animals are natural slaves. In the same manner, some people are natural slaves or servants, inferior by birth and intellect, and are destined to serve the ruling class. This order prevails across all of humanity in every land. Thinkers of Athens proclaim the correctness of this truth, and tutors like Sycophantus teach it to the sons of wealthy families.

"These bitches," he said, sweeping his arm toward the village, "think they have attained equality with the best, but they delude themselves. They are not thinking creatures. They do not understand the basic fundamental of life, that men are superior and must be obeyed, and that elite men are selected by nature to reign over all."

Irritation plagued me, yet I couldn't think of a rebuttal that made sense. It is true that men dominate women in all lands, and that top men dominate the rest, yet I wasn't sure that this is an absolute law of nature. As I fumbled for a reply, one-legged Octos lurched up on his crutches and sat beside us. Despite his crafty mind, Octos wore the rough look of the lower classes. I turned to him for assistance.

"Dalien is telling me that some people are natural masters, while others are natural slaves or servants."

Our aristocratic companion added: "Aristotle teaches this truth in Athens, and my tutor learned from him."

Octos grimaced, then thundered at Dalien:

"You spoiled whelp. Your rich Daddy paid a teacher to tell you what all rich people tell their sons: that they are superior to everyone else. But you didn't earn your privileged rank. It was handed to you purely by chance when you were born into a privileged family. The rich use every means possible to keep themselves on top, living off the labor of others."

Dalien looked wounded, defensive. "But you cannot deny that this order prevails in all the known world."

"No," Octos grumbled, "but that does not make it a divine plan mandated by the gods."

Dalien persisted: "It is noble for the highest men to rule over others, to care for them and be responsible for them. My father often said there are two types of people in the world: those who treat their servants well, and those who do not."

Octos grimaced. "And servants are not people at all, right?"

Dalien plunged onward:

"Aristotle is the wisest thinker in all of Greece. Top leaders of Athens heed him. He says the lower classes enjoy a better life when ruled by superiors who make beneficial decisions for them. And you cannot deny that Aristotle is correct about women. He says the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; the one rules, and the other is ruled. This principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind. We should regard the female as afflicted with a natural defectiveness."

Octos looked around at the village of strong women.

"Dalien, we all grew up in the Greek world where women are silent and submissive. But since I have dwelt in this female citadel, I have been amazed. Maybe your beloved Aristotle should come here and open his eyes."

Dalien was impatient. "This place is an aberration. It is a gross distortion of the natural laws of humankind."

The young aristocrat rose and limped back to the slave quarters. Octos and I sat by the trickling creek, wondering whether the laws of humankind are inherent in nature or imposed by the few at the top for their own benefit.

9

I lost my virginity just before my seventeenth birthday.

After six days in captivity, both Dalien and I could walk haltingly. We ceased using crutches and limped with canes. We were given our first assignment in the fields, pulling weeds among vegetables while armed Amazons supervised. Soaked with sweat, we returned to the slave quarters for dinner.

One evening a small girl approached and told me: "Hella calls you to her bed tonight. You must bathe in the lower pool and go to her chamber."

Although she's an enemy, I tingled with anticipation of my first bedding with a woman. I arrived fresh-scrubbed. The buxom Home Queen looked attractive in the lamp glow. She pulled me onto the pallet beside her.

"I myself will introduce you to your duty in our beds," she said. "Something about you touched me. Your beard has only begun, like chick down. You look like a son I never had."

She removed her tunic, revealing full breasts and ample body. Hot excitement flushed through me. She took my hand and placed it on her breast. With her other hand, she touched my secret part. Almost immediately, I convulsed in a climax that shook my body, leaving me weak, and soaked.

She laughed. "You're an excitable boy. Rest a bit and we will start again."

"This is my first time," I blurted.

She smiled with understanding. "Soon, you will be an experienced lover. You will be called to many beds. You must learn to make women happy. Some of the warriors will place strong demands on you."

In the evening that followed, I nearly swooned from the pleasure of her body, not once but twice more. I felt too weak to dress and hobble back to the slave quarters.

"Sleep against me the rest of the night," she said. It was a slave command I obeyed gladly.

All night I held her voluptuous body. At morning, we woke and shared another lovemaking.

I had entered manhood, as my best friend Rek did years earlier. When I returned to the slave quarters, I felt as if I were floating and couldn't stop smiling.

Dalien glared. "Have you joined the enemy? So soon? After just one night?"

I didn't answer, but fell onto my pallet, exhausted.

Two nights later, Dalien was called to the bed of a young warrior. I could see that he was torn by contradictory feelings.

"I will not be their slave," he said. "I still cannot walk enough to escape. Until then, I will pretend to cooperate. In my mind, it will be as if I am raping a despised enemy."

Next I was summoned by the sturdy woman in charge of brickmaking and house construction. In the midst of our lovemaking, she had a mighty convulsion that left her body shuddering and quivering. She gripped me tight, then soon fell fast asleep, snoring softly. Awake by myself, I realized that it was up to me to decide whether to go or stay. I stayed, nuzzled against her breasts. In the morning she seemed puzzled that I had remained, but said: "Since you're still here, I have further duties for you." She pulled me onto her naked body for a new round of joy.

A few nights later I was called by my first fighting woman, Leeantha, a hard-muscled soldier. She lived in the warrior quarters, in a corner room. She looked at my slight build.

"You are so puny I could break you with one hand. But others say you are good on the pallet."

She pulled off my clothing, then hers, and shoved me down on her bed. She lay back and pulled me atop her.

"I will show you how to give pleasure to a woman," she said, pushing my face downward, past her breasts and belly to her female core. At her instruction, I touched my tongue tip to the small protrusion inside her. She gasped and held her breath. As I continued, she moaned and writhed. Finally she stiffened and screamed, clenching me in her strong arms and legs.

At her scream, another Amazon burst through the door with a drawn sword. She stared at our naked bodies locked together, then roared. She called other warriors to the door and they joined in the laughter.

Strangely, I felt affection for my captors, my enslavers.

* * *

Soon I was called again by Hella, the Home Queen, who treated me with an odd mixture of motherly fondness and wanton lust. Her full body quivered as we writhed and clutched on her pallet. Afterward, as we lay still together in the soft lamplight, I felt that I could speak openly with her.

"My lady, how did you come to this hidden colony?"

She sat up, poured us two cups of wine, and answered quietly:

"I was just fourteen when my father married me to a battle-scarred soldier twice my age. He and I lived in a hut beside an army compound. I tried to make a happy home life for us, but he had little interest. He deemed me a pet to whom he returned when no better entertainment was at hand. Most evenings, he drank with fellow soldiers at a bonfire. Often he was gone on patrol for many days. I was forbidden to leave the hut, except to cook and wash clothing in our small courtyard. I was only a minor possession to my husband.

"When I became pregnant, he made it clear that he wanted a son to be raised proudly as a soldier. I grew apprehensive, fearing that the baby might be a girl, but I hid my concern.

"My delivery day was a nightmare. A midwife came to our hut and helped me through the pain. I felt great relief when the child left my body, but I suffered new alarm when she showed me that it was a girl, a perfect, beautiful, flawless girl. I suckled the baby tenderly and prayed that my husband would accept her.

"He refused. He wouldn't come into the bedchamber and look at her. Instead he ordered the midwife to take her to the waste pit by the riverbank and leave her to die like other unwanted females. My spirit was crushed. Uncontrollable sobs burst from me. I tried to hold onto the baby but the midwife pulled her away and rushed from the house. My husband left to join his soldier friends.

"I sank into misery so severe that I could hardly move. Alone in the hut, I felt desperate and delusional. For hours I was in a stupor. Then I woke abruptly and realized that I must run to the waste pit, find the baby, and suckle her before it was too late. I barely could walk, but I cloaked myself and went to the river, searching for the pit. It was futile. When I finally found the refuse dump, the perfect little girl was dead. I slumped to the ground and wailed.

"In a garden beside the pit, slave women were hoeing vegetables. Two of them came to comfort me. They asked if they should call a male slave to escort me home. Something changed inside me, and I blurted that I never would go home. It was an angry impulse, irrational, because I knew that females cannot survive alone, apart from men's shelters. But my feeling was intense.

"The women looked at each other. They hid me in a shed and brought vegetables for me. At night they returned and told me a deep secret: Across the river, a widow lives in a cottage at the edge of a swamp. Among her flowers, two pots of hanging vines adorn her wall, a covert signal to runaway women. She would hide and feed me a few days, then direct me to another such home, and thence to another, until I finally reached those mysterious rebels, the Amazons.

"The following night, hidden by darkness, I waded the shallow river at a shoal and went to the sanctuary house. Thus I came to the clan of the Amazons. It was many years ago, but I never have regretted my choice."

I hugged Hella tightly. We lay in silence. Within me, I detested the Greek system whereby men decide, almost by whim, whether girls live or die.

* * *

Despite my small frame, the Amazons seemed pleased by me as a bedmate. On the day before the full moon, Eila the priestess came to my workplace in the bean patch and told me that I would play Eros in the ritual before the Aphrodite statue.

"As dusk approaches," she instructed, "you must bathe carefully, then pray to all the gods to purify yourself. Thus you will be prepared and worthy."

I didn't tell her that I ceased praying years ago. But I followed the rest of her orders. Next evening, I limped to the goddess shrine as dusk darkened the valley and the gleaming moon rose like a beacon. Torches flamed beside the wooden platform, splashing golden flickers upon the painted face of Aphrodite and upon the healthy human faces of the women standing in a circle around the sacred tableau.

I was apprehensive that I would be embarrassed to be naked before observers. But when the Eros mask was lowered over my head, a change came over me. I felt anonymous, as if I were invisible, not really present as Melos the scribe. I was Eros, all male, the spirit of masculine lust.

Through the eyeholes, I saw Eila remove her tall headdress and her robe. Glimmering torchlight rippled over her exquisite body. As other Amazons removed my clothing, I felt no embarrassment, only desire.

The nude priestess raised her arms to the Aphrodite statue and chanted: "Queen of love, queen of passion, queen of rapture, queen of ecstasy, queen of the eternal craving of man for woman and woman for man, you are the flame of life."

She donned her Aphrodite mask and reclined on the pallet. I followed, and mounted her. We were violent. She moaned and clawed me. It was over swiftly. Approving murmurs came from the watching Amazons.

Later, as I donned my clothes, I felt lingering ecstasy that made me wonder whether it truly had been a religious experience, despite my uncertainty about gods.

* * *

Soon, it became clear that I was called to women's beds more often than Dalien. As I headed to the bathing pool after dinner to prepare for night duty, he sat before the slave quarters, watching me resentfully.

"Go ahead, traitor," he said with a twisted grin. "You have sold your soul to the enemy."

That night, as I rested again between the large breasts of the Home Queen, I asked:

"My lady, why do the women rarely summon my friend Dalien?"

She eyed me carefully. "We don't feel good with him. You are smaller, and caring, but he is large and strong and full of hate. We can sense it. We don't feel safe with him."

She was completely correct. A few nights later, as Dalien and I lay on our pallets in the slave quarters, he confided to me:

"My leg has healed greatly. I pretend to limp badly, to fool the enemy, so they will not suspect my intent. I have a plan: The next time I am called to a woman's bed, I will wait until she is naked and defenseless, then strangle her silently with my strong hands. I will slip through the darkness to the corral, take a horse, and ride away into the night. When I reach Kavopolis, I can lead warriors back to this secret valley to wipe out the rebels."

A sick feeling surged through me. The mental picture of Litha, Mitha, the Home Queen, the construction leader and all being slashed to death in an attack was horrifying. I stayed silent as my mind raced. I knew that Dalien correctly saw his obligation as a soldier and a Greek patriot. Yet I was dismayed. He was right: I had sold my soul to the enemy.

"Well?" he asked in the dark. "Do you applaud my strategy?"

I weighed my answer carefully. Finally, I told him: "You are a loyal soldier following the code of duty. You will be a hero in Kavopolis, praised in the Assembly. They may promote you to commander."

I barely slept that night. The next day, I felt panic, wondering whether I should betray my friend to the Amazons, or whether I should remain mute until the women I had grown to like were slaughtered. Either choice seemed ghastly. I wavered from hour to hour.

Two evenings later, Dalien was summoned by the War Queen herself. As he left for the bathing pool, he looked at me intently. "Bid me luck," he said.

"Good luck," I said, hiding my inner strife.

All evening I sweated and breathed hard, wavering between my two impossible choices. I couldn't sleep. I was wide awake and still undecided at midnight when I heard sounds approaching. I went to the door with three other slaves, and we saw a gory sight:

Two Amazon warriors dragged Dalien's nude body to the doorway and dumped it, blood still oozing from knife wounds. One of the women announced:

"Slaves, this is the fate of mutineers. Our War Queen suspected that your insolent friend had evil intent, so she stationed us behind a curtain with daggers as a precaution. We saved her from him. If we learn that any of you were his conspirators, you will suffer his fate."

Next morning, all of us slaves were called outside, where Dalien's body still lay in the dirt. Women gathered to watch. It was a grim, tense time. We all stared at the corpse. Somehow, the death of an aristocrat seems more important than the death of a commoner. The War Queen, with purple bruises on her neck, observed silently. Another top warrior declared loudly:

"A slave dared to attack a master. The penalty for such a crime is visible before you. As a warning lesson, the rest of the slaves will receive three lashes."

We were lined up kneeling and each given three stinging cuts on our backs with a tough limb. Then we were forced to drag Dalien's body, toss it in the latrine pit and cover it with dirt. Octos looked at me sardonically.

"What an end for the natural master, the natural ruler."

My grief for my friend, and my pain from the lash welts, were too great for me to share his sarcasm.

For several days afterward, a distrustful silence hovered over the village, and no slaves were summoned for night duty. But gradually the coldness faded and the routine of life resumed.

10

In following days, we slaves sensed concern among the Amazons. They talked to each other in low tones. At first we wondered if they remained upset by Dalien's murder attempt. Then Ankus related what he heard:

"Celeste, the warrior who was stabbed in the side during the attack on Malgon's squad, isn't healing properly. She's burning with fever and can't rise from her bed. All the Amazons are preparing to sacrifice goats and pray for her."

Eila, the tall warrior-priestess who had played Aphrodite to my Eros, stood at her open-air shrine with its three goddess statues, welcoming women worshipers. Her tall headdress added more height to her sway over the gathering. Amazons led three white goats to three altars. The bleating animals were festooned with the brightest ribbons available in the village to make them pleasing to the goddesses. From the slave quarters, we could hear the women praying and chanting loudly, begging the goddesses to spare Celeste. I looked at craggy Octos and asked:

"Do you really think that Hera, Aphrodite and Artemis will heal Celeste because goats are stabbed on their altars by their statues?"

"Fairy tales," he replied with a sour grin. "It's all fairy tales. Every Greek prays his rump off to different gods, and covers their altars with blood, and consults the oracles, but it never produces any results. It's just mumbo-jumbo that the priests use to exalt themselves over everyone else."

I grinned with him. I admired old Octos because he saw human follies.

Two days later came news that Celeste had died. Mournful Amazons carried her to the burial knoll. I was among slaves sent to dig her grave. When I returned, I looked at Octos knowingly.

"You were right about the god magic. Didn't help a bit."

He shrugged.

But I wasn't quite as skeptical as Octos. As a young seeker of truth, I puzzled over baffling questions. The next day I voiced my perplexity:

"Octos, the ferns on the creek bank have perfect symmetry, like lace. They are pure green beauty. And acorns in the oak trees are wonderful little creations, bearing future giant oaks within them. And butterflies in the horse pasture have marvelous patterns. And the union of a man and woman produces a tiny baby of such flawless design that it may grow into Alexander the Great or Aristotle or Helen of Troy. What made all these wonders? If Zeus didn't do it, who did?"

The one-legged slave looked at me with respect, knowing that I was wrestling with a profound quandary. He spoke carefully and slowly:

"I don't know. Nobody really knows. Priests claim to know, but they don't. An honest person can say only that nature makes many miracles, but we cannot know what created nature. We simply must accept it as a mystery beyond our grasp."

His reply didn't answer my puzzle, yet it gave me comfort.

* * *

The War Queen trained her fighters almost daily. In the morning coolness, they ran up embankments, leaped across gullies, climbed trees, bounced in calisthenics, practiced archery and javelin-throwing, and drilled in mock combat with wooden swords. Occasionally they saddled horses and practiced galloping warfare.

One morning, near their hillside training place, I gathered firewood for the bakery. As the perspiring women rested during a break, I heard the queen lecture them:

"Never forget: male warriors are selected from the biggest brutes in the land. They are twice as heavy and twice as strong as you. If you fight them directly, you will be killed. That is why we use cunning. We attack at night when they are unclothed and unarmed. In daytime fighting, always avoid one-on-one combat. Use arrows from a distance, or javelins. If you cannot stay out of a man's reach, attack in pairs from two sides. If he turns to face one of you, the other can strike him from behind."

After their drill, the women went to the pool, peeled off their damp clothing, and washed it as they frolicked in the water. From a distance I watched their shiny wet bodies.

On some evenings the Amazons gathered for communal dinner outside the Home Queen's quarters. Then the warriors entertained everyone with combat competitions. Jewelry from caravan raids was awarded as prizes to the best archer, best javelin-thrower, and the like. We slaves watched from afar. The competition with wooden swords was violent. We saw the trainee Mitha knocked unconscious by a ferocious sword whack that slipped past her shield. The War Queen poured water on her from a gourd, then the group cheered as she sat up, groggy.

* * *

One afternoon, as I sat in dirt weeding the bean patch, I was approached by both the Home Queen and War Queen.

"We are going to reprieve you from the mud for half of each day," Hella said. "We need your scribe skills. We want you to record our Amazon history, and also teach our women and girls to read and write. No Greek females are allowed such learning, but we are nobler than the Greeks. Mornings, you must continue field work; afternoons, you will be scribe and teacher."

The War Queen added:

"When you teach, remember that you are a slave. Address each student as 'my lady.' Do not show arrogance toward your pupils or you will regret it."

I replied that lengthy preparations would be needed: I must make parchment from the sheep flock grazing in hills above the village. And I must make ink and reed pens. They consulted each other and said they remembered such supplies among booty from caravan raids, including my own materials from Commander Malgon's troop. They led me to a storage shed. There was my leather bottle of ink, two pens, and sheets of papyrus. Even better, a trove of caravan loot contained a stoppered gourd of lampblack, ready to mix with gum tree sap to make ink, plus a treasure: fifty perfect sheets of the finest parchment I had seen.

They assigned me to a room near the Home Queen's bedroom.

"When your day duties end, you won't have far to travel for your night work," Hella said with a grin.

I arranged benches and set up a classroom. On twenty-four sheets of papyrus, I inked large images of letters of the alphabet: alpha, beta, gamma, delta, epsilon, zeta, eta, theta, iota, kappa, lambda, mu, nu, xi, omicron, pi, rho, sigma, tau, upsilon, phi, chi, psi, omega. With thorns from a honey locust, I pinned the sheets across the front wall. My learning room was just like the one attended by apprentices of the high scribe of Kavopolis.

Soon I began teaching clusters of pupils: girls as young as six and women beyond thirty. As the assistants in my former scribe school had done, I pointed to each letter, using my cane, and the pupils repeated the names aloud, childish chirps mingling with adult female voices. They memorized the letters and we held competitions in reciting the alphabet. Next they learned how letter sounds combine in words.

Then I taught them penmanship. I showed them how to cut reeds at the proper slant to make writing tips, how to squeeze and release them in the inkpots so they filled properly, and how to hold them with correct pressure to emit just the right amount of ink without making ugly blots. Soon my trainees could write letters, words and sentences on papyrus, then read aloud from their work. It impressed me that women and girls learned just as fast as we male apprentices had done at the scribe school. I looked at them with newfound respect.

The Slavic sisters, Litha and Mitha, came to my class intermittently. Their golden-tan hair stood out in the room of black heads. I felt drawn to Litha's lovely face. Amid the group, I could not keep my eyes off her. After a session, I waited by the door and asked her why they missed some lessons.

"I spend many days at the shepherd cottage on the hill, watching the flock," she said. "And Mitha often is assigned to sentry duty above the cliff at the entrance of the valley, when her warrior training sessions are over."

I had another question, but wasn't sure I could ask it. Finally I said:

"My lady, some women of the village order me to their beds at night. I wish that you--"

She flushed deep red.

"I am still a novice among the Amazons," she stammered. "I cannot give commands."

Then she blurted apologetically: "I am a novice in bed too."

We looked at each other, feeling a deep bond between us.

11

Eventually I was ordered to begin writing the Amazon history. I was called before the two queens and the village council. The War Queen began:

"I am the senior member of this village. I was born here forty-two years ago, daughter of the warrior Estia, who was killed in fighting along the Black Sea shore when I was ten. From her and other older women, I learned our story, which I have related many times."

I begged the War Queen to speak slowly as I scribbled hasty notes on papyrus. Later, alone in my teaching room, I carefully inked her account onto parchment, then read it back to the council at our next meeting. Herewith is the War Queen's tale of the origin of the Amazon village:

"Many years ago, Arab slave traders purchased thirty Greek women in Thessaloniki and marched them eastward in a caravan along the Black Sea, heading for the slave markets of Arabia. The women were tied together by leather thongs around their necks. Each night on the trek, the traders pitched tents, built fires, fed themselves and their human merchandise, and posted guards. Then they stripped a few women naked and untied them to be their bedmates.

"During the days of marching, the women conspired furtively in whispers, plotting escape. On the fateful night, shapely women enticed the guards by baring their breasts. As each guard lowered his weapons and seized the seemingly eager female, he was clubbed from behind by a lurking woman and killed with his own dagger. Thus armed, the escapers cut off their neck straps and burst into tents, dispatching other slavers who were distracted in the midst of sex. A few Arabs resisted briefly before they were subdued. At the end, two women slaves had been killed and all the traders.

"In the darkness, the surviving women took everything in the caravan--tents, wagons, food, horses, weapons--and fled up the Thermodon Valley. During daylight they hid in forest and discussed how

they might survive as fugitives. They made a pact to bond together as sisters to resist recapture. Each stood and pledged aloud to fight for the group. Even death, they agreed, would be better than returning to slavery.

"In the distance they saw a small farming village. They dressed a young woman as a boy and sent her to reconnoiter. In a cottage at a fringe of the town, the spy found an old widow living alone, tending her vegetable garden, her only means of sustenance. The widow was amazed to encounter a girl traveling freely like a man. As they talked, it became clear that the woman resented the helplessness imposed on females. So the girl revealed that a band of runaway women waited in the forest. She asked for guidance.

"The widow pondered, then offered a wonderful suggestion: A half-day farther up the Thermodon, she said, in a side-valley overgrown by brush, lies a former farm village that was abandoned after plague swept its inhabitants. As families sickened and died, the village priest had offered many sacrifices to appease the gods, until the community's livestock was gone. Then he sacrificed a child in a futile attempt to end the divine wrath. Finally he proclaimed that gods had cursed the valley, and he led survivors in fleeing the blighted spot. Nobody knows where they went or whether they managed to stay alive.

"The widow's tale gave the fugitives hope. When night fell, they proceeded up the Thermodon and found the side-valley. After daybreak, with nobody in sight, they crept through the thorny foliage until they emerged at the abandoned village. Its buildings were in disrepair, but its grape arbor and olive and fig groves still thrived. They ate the awaiting fruit and began restoring the structures. Enough seeds remained in a barn to replant fallow fields and gardens. They dammed the creek, making a bathing pool. They watered the thorn thicket and planted new shoots, creating a green barrier that concealed their presence.

"Thereafter, the women occasionally sent spies at night to visit the widow who had steered them to their hideout. She kept their secret. Eventually she became the first covert station in a network of such clandestine homes that guided runaway women to the sanctuary. It was decided that volunteers in the network would hang two pots of vines together on the sides of their homes as a secret sign to fugitives.

"Also, women in the hidden community sent horseback spies dressed as men to watch from high ground along the Black Sea, to spot approaching caravans. Upon seeing one, a lookout would gallop back to inform the colony, and the strongest women would arm themselves for a raid. Caravans were struck at midnight when most men were asleep. If any slave women or concubines were in a caravan, they were allowed to choose whether to join the band of female rebels or be liberated on their own, to go wherever they wished. The freed females usually became Amazons, because they feared the prospect of being alone on foot, defenseless in a strange land.

"Slowly the culture of our community grew, with bold women warriors making raids and capturing wounded male slaves, while other women under the Home Queen tended the village."

Hella, the Home Queen, joined the record-telling: "Most of us have heard Greek tales of rebel women called Amazons, and we heard rumors that other hidden colonies of Amazons exist, but we never met any sisters-at-arms."

Saria resumed with a derisive laugh: "Once, among caravan loot, we found a wagon full of bowls painted with scenes of Greek warriors killing Amazons. We used the bowls for javelin practice until all were shattered."

This account of the origin of the Amazon hideaway was pinned outside the Home Queen's front door, where my pupils read it aloud as part of their training.

12

Next the council ordered me to record testimonies of various Amazons. I listened to the women and wrote the following personal tales:

ALETHA

"My mother was a consecrated woman among hundreds in the great Aphrodite temple at Corinth. I grew up among the sacred prostitutes who offered their bodies in service to the gods. Men came in droves, many of them sailors bringing cargoes to the Corinth port, and paid to share joy with temple women in the shrine's curtained alcoves.

"When I was thirteen, I too was pledged to serve men in behalf of the gods. I was young and comely, and was chosen many, many times, often bedding as many as ten visitors per day. I earned great sums for the temple.

"Slowly an awareness grew in me. The priests said all the money was for the gods, but the deities didn't spend it. Only the priests did, living like kings on the profits from our bodies. I began to see them as bordello operators. We consecrated women were little more than their whores. I came to think that gods had nothing to do with the temple.

"Occasionally we were ordered to join an orgy with priests, who gave us jewels and called us their pets. By then I saw religion as a scheme for money, sex and power over others.

"From other temple prostitutes, I learned of the two vines that guide runaway women to the Amazons. With another young consecrate, my best friend, I fled one rainy night, carrying bags of food. We reached a riverbank and thought we had succeeded in escaping. But we heard slave-hunters pursuing with dogs. My friend was cornered by the tracking dogs. She was shoved down into the dirt, bound hand and foot, and carried away. But I jumped into the stream, swam across, hid under foliage, and eluded detection.

"At night I followed the secret route of the two vines, and today I am a proud Amazon."

RACHA

"As the only black-skinned Amazon, I am unique in the group. The War Queen always chooses me to slip up behind caravan guards in the night, nearly invisible. It is a mission I have performed often.

"I am a Nubian from the upper Nile Valley. As a child I was happy in our village--until armed slave traders raided one day when I was eleven. They killed everyone who resisted capture. I saw my father felled by arrows as he fought back with a spear. My mother, brothers, sisters and I, along with many other villagers, were bound together and herded into a barge that floated down the Nile. At a port near the delta, we were separated and stowed in the cargo holds of ships heading for slave markets.

"I was brought to Greece and sent to a camp of slaves digging iron ore at a pit north of Delphi. Many of us wore yokes on our shoulders, carrying wooden buckets of ore from the pit to waiting wagons. Years of the gruelling work made me stronger, tougher, harder--and determined to break free. From older slave women, I heard of the two vines that mark the secret pathway.

"We women bathed each evening in a creek by the camp. Male guards gathered to view our nakedness. Repeatedly they seized a dripping woman, held her down on the grass, and raped her. I was the object of such treatment several times.

"One evening at dusk, a lone guard with a drawn dagger accosted me behind bushes. He commanded me to lie down and spread my legs. I pretended to submit. He removed his clothing and climbed atop me. In the blink of an eye, I seized the knife and plunged it into his heart, holding my hand over his mouth to stifle his outcry. I pulled his naked body into the bushes and donned his clothing, strapping on his weapons. From the corral I took one of the horses that pulled ore wagons, and rode off into the twilight.

"I rode all night, hid in woods during daylight, and joined the horse in drinking from creeks. Eventually I found a house with two vines. Although the matron of the home had never seen a black person, she sheltered and fed me for several days, then told me how to reach the next sanctuary on the northbound escape route.

"The long journey to the Thermodon Valley required three months and many stays at two-vine homes. Finally I found freedom in the secret village of the Amazons."

THEBA

"My mother was a concubine to the prince of Thebes, and she named me for the city. I grew up in the palace among the prince's many other children. He often coddled me on his lap and told me I was a little beauty.

"But when I was fourteen, the prince died abruptly--poisoned, it was said, by a rival cousin who subsequently gained his throne. The new ruler purged the palace of the old prince's favorites. Mother and I were sent into slavery along with others. We found ourselves on a galley laden with people in bondage, heading north to the slave market at Philippi. From women in the steamy hold of the vessel, I learned of the covert escape route, the homes with two vines.

"As our ship passed a protruding peninsula, another girl and I decided to swim for freedom. When no guards were in sight, we dived overboard and paddled with all our strength. Behind us on the boat, I heard shouts as archers shot at us. My companion shrieked as an arrow pierced her. I dived underwater and stroked until my lungs nearly burst. When I surfaced, the other girl had disappeared and the galley was moving into the distance.

"I reached shore, hid in the forest, and found the safety of the two-vine pathway like others before me."

OLANDRA

"As you can see, I am the most battle-scarred warrior, having lost my left hand and right ear in a clash with Greek soldiers. Because of my impairments, I am excused from combat training and raids. Instead I usually am assigned to dress as a man and serve as horseback lookout on high ground along the Black Sea, watching for caravans or military brigades. While posted there, I try to avoid contact with outside people, especially residents of Balaris, the small port city at the mouth of the Thermodon. But at night I often visit the house of two vines at the outskirts of the community to learn of happenings that I may relate to our colony.

"Unlike most of our group, I was born in this Amazon village. My mother was Alize, a master archer who could shoot from horseback at full gallop. As I grew, she trained me until I was as skilled as she. After I became a warrior, we were inseparable, riding and fighting side by side.

"We met tragedy one night when I was seventeen years old. In a small troop of eight, we attacked a camped caravan of wagons, expecting only a few ill-trained guards. But to our surprise, twenty burly Greek soldiers were sleeping fully dressed under the wagons. As we charged in on horseback, we saw them scramble into the light of campfires, seize weapons and fan out to fight. We were outnumbered and driven back.

"The largest soldier, a giant as big as Hercules, hurled a javelin that plunged through my mother riding beside me. She looked at me imploringly as she fell from the saddle. I went mad and galloped wildly at the giant, flailing my axe. He deflected my chop with his shield and swung upward with his sword, clipping off my ear. I didn't even feel it. Then he struck again and I saw my left hand fly away, still clutching the reins.

"In shock, I galloped a short distance, then fell off my horse into deep grass in the dark. Lying on my back, I frantically gripped my wrist to stop the bleeding. I heard the giant tell a young foot-soldier to take a flaming torch from a campfire, go to where I lay and finish me with a spear.

"In a daze, I saw the approaching flame and the face of the youth. He stood over me with the torch in one hand and his raised spear in the other. I held my breath and awaited death. The young man, about my own age, stared intently into my face. I'll never forget his look of distress. Then, with a flourish, he plunged the spear into the sod beside me, pulled it out, wiped it on his tunic tail as though removing blood, and rejoined his companions.

"I lay deathly still in the dark, hidden in the tall grass. I was so blood-covered that I could have passed for a corpse if another soldier had come to check on me, but none did. The Greeks had driven off the Amazons. I heard the men shouting commands to hitch up horses and get the caravan moving, without waiting for daybreak. After a while the noises faded.

"At dawn the small Amazon troop returned to the scene of our failed raid. I heard mournful calls as they found my mother's body and the

corpse of a young Amazon killed by a Greek arrow. The latter had fallen face-down into a campfire and had been left to char as the soldiers marched away. I shouted and the women came to help me. They tied a strap around my wrist, found my strayed horse, and lifted me into my saddle. The bodies of my mother and the charred young Amazon were put into a shallow grave and covered with flat stones.

"Our trip back to this hidden valley was bitter, full of grief and agonizing over our failure to perceive the danger before attacking. In subsequent days, the Amazon council debated ways to obtain more accurate information before raids.

"As I slowly healed in my maimed form, I grieved for my mother and hated her killers. Yet I couldn't forget that some Greek soldiers have enough compassion to spare the life of a wounded girl."

* * *

After I transcribed these tales onto parchment, I pinned the sheets to my classroom walls for my pupils to read. To show off their new skills, some students carried the sheets to the evening bonfires and read them aloud to the gathered Amazons, drawing applause and cheers. I was proud of my trainees.

Privately, unknown to the village, I also began writing my own personal story, the saga of Melos of Aegolus, hiding finished sheets in a box of supplies.

13

During a break from her duty at the shepherd cottage, Litha returned to my reading class. Seeing her again stirred warmth in me, and she felt the same. She lingered after class, inventing excuses to ask about written letters and their sounds in spoken words. When we were alone, she touched my arm, looked into my eyes and gave me a stealthy kiss. We both knew that we belonged together.

The next day, Litha went to the Home Queen and asked if she could have me in bed. The queen smiled indulgently and approved. Further, Hella freed us both from a day's work so we might share a brief honeymoon in Litha's room in the novice building. It was at ground level, making it easy for me to reach as I limped on my cane.

It was the most wonderful time of my life, and of Litha's. As she disrobed and reclined on her pallet, shamelessly displaying her slender body with tipped-up breasts, I was transfixed. Kissing, touching, caressing gave us fever. When I penetrated her, enchantment engulfed us. Our bodies fit wonderfully. When we were too exhausted for more lovemaking, we clutched each other and talked, sharing inner thoughts.

Thereafter we were inseparable. I still was summoned to Amazon beds on nearly half of nights, but all the rest I spent in Litha's room. Fatigue from field labor vanished when I took her in my arms. When we embraced, it felt as though mysterious current flowed between our bodies. As she grew accustomed to me as her lover, her body responded naturally. When I touched her intimately, she sucked in her breath and murmured, almost in pain. As passion grew, she became silent and tense, then shuddered in a release that left her quivering with small spasms. Afterward, we lay limp in each other's arms.

* * *

Like her older sister, Litha spoke Greek with an accent. As we lay together at night, naked in the lamplight, she told me her life story:

"In the land of the Slavs, my family was unusual. Of course we were not nobles, but neither were we serfs like most people. My grandfather had cleared a small valley and the local prince let him keep it, as long as he gave the prince a yearly share of his crops. Eventually the valley was divided into separate farms for my father and his brothers. I had eleven brothers and sisters. My mother was forever pregnant, producing baby after baby, even as she worked from daylight to dark.

"We all worked intensely. Father often said that being masters of our own farm, instead of being serfs to a noble, made us labor harder. Father made us feel a spirit of freedom.

"I was ten years old when Macedonian Greeks invaded Slav lands. We first heard about the war as the prince rode through our valley with his guards, taking all the young men to be soldiers. My three eldest brothers were eager to fight. They said they would be heroes in a mighty adventure. My father needed them as farm hands, but said nothing because he dared not oppose the prince. We never saw my brothers again.

"Later, visitors to our valley told of Macedonians massacring Slav defenders. Fear hung over us. We worried for my older brothers. As a precaution, Father stocked an urn of grain and another of water in a hillside cave behind our farm, preparing a possible hideout.

"One afternoon my uncle galloped on his horse to warn that Macedonians were approaching. Our whole family--Father, Mother, Mitha, me and six smaller children--ran to the cave. But hiding was futile. The soldiers found our ox still hitched to the plow and the cooking fire still smoking. They knew we had fled only moments before. Scouts searched the countryside and found us. We were dragged out into the sunlight and held at swordpoint.

"I was small, with no breasts, so the soldiers ignored me. But Mitha, the oldest, was less lucky. Her body had bloomed. One soldier held her hair as others ripped off her clothing. While the rest of us cringed and sobbed, they shoved her to the ground and raped her repeatedly.

"The tall Macedonian commander arrived and began sorting the spoils of conquest. He wore an extra-long sword, which he stood against a tree. We children were placed beside it. Those taller than the sword--Mitha, me, and two younger brothers--were led aside to be slaves. Those

shorter were pushed back to my parents. The commander could not speak our language, but his meaning was clear: my parents could keep four tots too small to work, but we tall children were now booty. The commander was like a fisherman keeping big fish and throwing back small ones. The soldiers also took our cows, pigs and grain to feed their brigade and its prisoners.

"The four of us were tied together with leather straps and led away. We could hear Mother crying behind us as we were marched down the valley. That was the last we saw of my parents and little brothers and sisters.

"Soon we met other soldiers leading my cousins from other farms. Since young Slavic men had left the valley, the Macedonians seized taller children and young women. When we cousins cried out to each other, soldiers pointed swords at us and we fell silent. We were marched downstream to a larger valley, where we were put into a stockade with many other captives. It was the first time I had left my home valley.

"The Macedonians gave us food--produce stolen from our own farms--then marched us further downstream to the Great River. There we were forced to help build large rafts of logs tied together with vines, our transport into slavery. The task took two days, and we slept at night on the riverbank. When the rafts were ready, we were loaded aboard with bags of food.

"Our flotilla of young slaves floated slowly down the Great River, watched by armed guards on each raft and by occasional patrols along the shore. To drink, we dipped water from the wide stream. We had no latrine, but hung off the back of the raft. We slept on the logs, huddled together like foxes in a den. From time to time we passed small cities. After five days we came to an awesome sight: a large port city with a broad ocean stretching behind it, vanishing at the hazy horizon. Later we learned it was the Black Sea.

"Beside a river pier was a slave trading post built of upright logs. Women and girls were locked in one chamber and boys were sent to another. Our small brothers looked back to Mitha and me before they disappeared. We never saw them again. The next day, slave merchants examined us, poking and squeezing our bodies to assess our fitness. Mitha's breasts were checked with great relish. Finally a fat trader bought

six of us and we were led to a small sailing ship in the harbor. Luckily, Mitha and I remained together in the lot.

"The ship spent two days crossing to the southern coast. Then we were marched inland to our destination: a quarry where creamy white marble was excavated for the temples and statues of Greece. Under guard, a hundred slave men hacked and split marble blocks in a dusty pit. Breezes swirled clouds of powder into their lungs. They tried to cover their noses, but they coughed painfully. On windy days the diggers were white like ghosts.

"Women didn't dig marble. We were assigned to a cooking shed where we prepared food to carry to the men. We dipped urns of water from a small stream and slaked their thirst. At night, women slaves slept in a small bunkhouse, while the men had large barracks. Older Slav men talked with us. They had learned to speak some Greek and taught us words. We learned that, to Greeks, the word Slav meant slave.

"We worked four years at the quarry. We learned the Greek language. My body bloomed like Mitha's, and I lost my virginity violently, as she did. Five quarry guards held me down on the creek bank and took turns with me. Slaves are mere possessions, like cattle or pigs, defenseless. Later the quarry superintendent ordered me into his bed a few nights. But he preferred experienced women among the cooks, instead of a frightened girl. Despite all this, I didn't feel like a sexual woman, because I never gave myself willingly to a lover--until now.

"Then the marble vein dwindled until only thin layers remained. The quarry owner sold half his slaves to traders. Mitha and I were among ten women bound in a string and marched south to a small market at Kavopolis. That's where we were sold to the Overseer of Aegolus. And you know the rest of my life."

I held Litha close. We pondered the strange cruelty of tribes endlessly warring upon each other and enslaving each other.

* * *

Late one night, sweaty from lovemaking, Litha said: "Let's swim."

"I can't enter the Amazon pool," I reminded her.

"Then I'll join you in the slave pool."

Naked, we walked through the dark village and quietly entered the warm water. She felt deliciously slippery against me. Soon, to our surprise, we made love a second time at water's edge. Then we made our stealthy return to her room. We felt like secret spies, undetected by people around us. It was a time of great happiness.

"I may become pregnant," she said. "If I bear you a son, I would want to keep him, not send him into slavery as the Amazons do with male babies."

The thought of losing our possible son disturbed me.

"But we might have no choice. The Amazons are strong women with strong rules. They wouldn't make an exception for a slave and a novice."

I felt unease: "If we were ordered to let our son be sent away, we might want to flee from the Amazons. But how could we go, with me hobbling on a cane? And where could we go? We couldn't live with my people, who treat women like livestock. You would be punished as a slave who stabbed her master. And I couldn't walk north to your Slavic homeland."

We lay in silence. Then I said: "We don't belong among the Amazons. We don't belong among the Greeks. We don't belong anywhere."

After a moment Litha answered: "We belong with each other. We belong together."

She was correct. Together we made our own private sanctuary, a haven from the world's ugliness. It was as if we occupied a snug lifeboat, while storms churned the sea around us. Litha's bed was our refuge. There is such a shelter in each other.

Day after day, as a secure couple, we enjoyed the quiet comfort of being together. Simple things--sitting on the creek bank, watching the water ripple over smooth stones, skipping flat rocks on the pools, washing garments and spreading them on bushes in the sun, seeing leaves rustle against the sky, watching dappled sunlight sprinkling through trees, smelling woodsmoke from the cooking fires, washing pots after dinner, watching long shadows of evening stretch across the valley, hearing little girls laugh as they ran barefoot around the village--all these daily trifles

seemed deeply satisfying when we did them as a pair. Even so common a thing as looking at serene cloud streaks in the twilight sky gave us peace. It reminded me of an adage my grandfather recited: A pleasure shared is doubled, and a sorrow shared is halved.

The next time I met Octos at the slave quarters, he looked me over.

"You're glowing, boy. I think you've found paradise."

I grinned sheepishly, feeling foolish.

"Don't apologize," he said. "You've discovered a great truth. All the priests talk about heaven, but they're speling mumbo-jumbo. You've found the only paradise that's real: the heaven that a good couple make for each other."

I asked how he knew about Litha and me.

"Hell, son, everyone knows everything in this beehive. And most feel glad for you two."

Henceforth, when I was ordered to the beds of various Amazons, it was different. I felt guilty, as if I was betraying Litha. But I enjoyed the other women too. So I was torn by mixed feelings that I suppose have pulled many men in contrary directions.

* * *

As Litha progressed in writing, wielding reed pens with increasing skill, she uncovered a talent. One day in class I noticed her staring intently at me and making long strokes with her pen. After the other pupils departed, she showed me her creation: a drawing of my face that was quite lifelike. I hugged her proudly.

The following day she watched her reflection on a polished bronze shield and drew a similar sketch of herself. She showed the two drawings to Hella and persuaded the Home Queen to sit quietly while she sketched her too. Next she drew her sister, then the War Queen, then my mentor Octos, and others in the village. Outside the door of my classroom, we pinned her drawings for the village to see.

14

Strangely, I took satisfaction from teaching the Amazons to read and write. It changed something inside me. During the years when I had been a free Greek male, I hardly questioned the ways of our land, which ranked men as the only thinking humans. Intelligent Greek boys were educated in skills of the mind while women and girls were consigned to a lower order, as housekeepers and sexual servants. It would have been unthinkable to put a girl in school to teach her words and ideas. But now I was doing it every day. And the females learned with surprising ease, as rapidly as my former male classmates had done. It troubled me to realize that my previous Greek world was based on a false assumption of female inferiority.

One evening, as I recorded proceedings of the Amazon council, I asked permission to speak. I told the assembly: "My ladies, I am struck by an odd fact. As you know, the vast majority of Greek women remain illiterate. Only a few daughters of rich families are taught. Remarkably, the largest number of literate Greek females is right here in this small colony."

The council applauded.

To prepare my classes, I searched for more papyrus and parchment in caravan loot stashed in chambers above my classroom. In a leather pouch, I found two parchment scrolls filled with writing. I brought them for my pupils to read and discuss.

The first scroll bore the name Heraclides of Pontus. It proposed a strange theory: that the sun and moon only seem to rise in the east, travel across the sky, and set in the west. In reality, it contended, our mighty Earth is not a fixed firmament, the bedrock of all existence, but is rolling in space, which makes the sun and moon appear to sweep across the sky repeatedly.

A young warrior named Elysia read the scroll aloud to my class. Afterward, the women and girls sat in silence pondering this remarkable

new idea. Finally, Litha, who had become my most faithful student, blurted:

"That's fascinating! If it's true, it would explain why the sun and moon follow the same path, day after day after day."

But a thickset Amazon named Hulta seemed upset.

"It cannot be true. Everyone knows that the gods on Mount Olympus command the sun and moon as their divine objects, ordering them to pass across daily. Eila the priestess has declared it so."

Vaguely I sensed that I might be stepping into danger. But we proceeded. I should have heeded my apprehension, because the second scroll caused an uproar. It bore the name Protagoras of Abdera and was titled *On the Gods*. A ten-year-old girl began reading:

"As for the gods, I am unable to know whether they exist or do not exist, nor what they are like in form. The factors preventing knowledge are many: the obscurity of the subject, and the shortness of life. I suspect, however, that all gods are imaginary, like creatures in dreams. I propose that the learned Assembly of Athens send an expedition north to Mount Olympus, where the strongest young men can climb to the top to see with their own eyes whether a Pantheon dwells at the peak."

Hulta leaped up and shouted:

"Sacrilege! Blasphemy! This insults all that is sacred and holy and divine. Such words never should be allowed. I will inform the priestess."

She stomped out. The rest of us stared at each other. At the pit of my stomach, an ominous feeling said I was in trouble. My stomach was correct. Within an hour, a warrior arrived and ordered me to follow her to an emergency meeting of the village council. Eila stood before the assembly, wearing her priestess robe and headdress. As I entered, she raged at me:

"He is teaching our young women that the gods are figments of the imagination, that all our holy sacrifices are pointless, wasted on nothing!"

"My lady--" I stammered.

"You were not given permission to speak," she snapped. But Hella, fond of me, interceded:

"Give him a chance to explain. Proceed, Melos."

I took a breath to steady my nerves.

"My ladies, I meant no harm. I merely let the pupils read a scroll obtained from a caravan, to improve their language skills. It is impressive that they now can read any writings, just like the most learned men in Greece."

I didn't mention my secret feeling that the Protagoras scroll was a ray of light amid the magic-filled darkness. But the priestess saw through me.

"Writing is dangerous, because it makes people doubt the truths we live by. Scribe, tell us clearly and directly: Do you contend that the many prayers we say to Hera, or the sacrifices we offer to Aphrodite, are meaningless?"

"No, my lady. I merely had my pupils read the scroll for practice."

"Do you believe that Artemis the huntress truly reigns on Mount Olympus, along with Zeus and the deities who guide the affairs of humanity?"

"My lady, I am just a slave. I defer to your greater wisdom about such knowledge."

"You didn't answer. Do you believe?"

"Yes, yes, my lady."

"He's lying to save his skin. He knows that the penalty for impiety in all lands is death."

The Home Queen interceded again: "He said he believes."

Eila wouldn't relent: "He must be flogged--if not for impiety, then for allowing such blasphemy to be read by our women. And the scroll must be burned."

The council murmured, then voted with the priestess. Two warriors led me to the shrine. I was forced to kneel before the Hera statue, where I received five stinging lashes from a slender branch. The punishment was repeated in front of the other two goddesses. Although each lash burned, I could tell that the warriors withheld their full fury. Perhaps they felt a tinge of sympathy for me.

Next the Protagoras scroll was ripped into three segments and a portion burned on the altar of each goddess. Afterward the priestess strode forward with the scroll about the sun and moon. It too was torn apart and burned.

In the following days, as my whip marks faded, I reached a conclusion about religion: If you must laugh at the magic tales, do it secretly inside yourself. Never let your doubts be known, because believers can be wrathful to anyone who questions their divine certainties.

15

After my temple flogging, I felt like an outcast in the colony for a few days. I kept my gaze downward and did my work in silence, avoiding top Amazons, especially Eila the priestess. But the strain passed. Several women spoke to me in friendly tones, almost as if they approved of my attempt to raise unorthodox ideas. Soon I again roamed the village as I wished, limping everywhere on my cane.

Once more I searched among caravan loot for writings for my students to read. Of course, I realized that any irreligious words would be forbidden.

One scroll recounted important findings about nature by Greek thinkers. The record of discoveries must have been compiled by a learned teacher. It fascinated my mind. Some of its entries:

Pythagoras discerned that the Evening Star and the Morning Star are the same body, the brightest planet.

Aristotle, the Athenian teacher admired by my late aristocrat friend Dalien, proved that the world is a sphere. Earth's shadow on the moon during an eclipse is circular, he noted, and ships seem to sink into the sea as they move far away, which is evidence of a curved surface.

Eratosthenes, master of the great Alexandria library, also declared that the world is a ball. He measured its size cleverly, as follows: In the southern city of Syene, it was known that an upright stick cast no shadow at noon on midsummer day, because the sun was precisely overhead. In Alexandria, however, upright objects cast shadows to their north sides at that hour, because they don't point squarely at the sun. Eratosthenes measured their shadows and found that they were tipped seven degrees, due to curvature of the earth's surface. He measured the distance between the two cities and calculated the circumference of the entire globe.

Pytheas watched recurring tides and concluded that they are caused by a pull of the moon.

Anaxagoras, who taught in Athens at the time of Pericles, declared that the sun and moon are natural bodies, not deities. He said the sun is aflame and the moon merely reflects the sun's light. For his writings, he was sentenced to death for doubting the gods, but Pericles interceded for him and he was allowed to depart into exile.

Aristarchus of Samos wrote that the sun is the center of the universe. He also measured the distance to the sun by using the visible moon in late afternoon. When the moon was exactly half-lit, he knew that a line from earth to the moon, thence to the sun, would form a right angle. So he calculated the angle of the sun in the west, completing a triangle of the three bodies, and established that the sun is nineteen times farther away than the moon.

Archimedes used water displacement ingeniously. King Hieron II of Syracuse commissioned an ornate gold crown, but after receiving it he suspected that the goldsmith had mixed cheaper silver with the gold as an alloy. The king asked Archimedes to determine if this fakery had occurred. Since gold weighs nearly twice as much as silver, the riddle could have been solved easily by weighing the crown and comparing with a quantity of pure gold of the same volume. But it was impossible to compute the volume of the elaborate crown with many curves and protrusions. As Archimedes sat down in his bath, he saw the water rise in the tub by precisely the volume of his submerged body. He shouted "Eureka," because he realized that submerging the crown in a container would raise the water level by an easily measured amount exactly matching the volume of the crown.

All these achievements seemed wondrous to me. I felt proud that people can use their minds to reach remarkable findings. The scroll would be good for my students to read—but I must omit the assertions that caused Anaxagoras to be sentenced for impiety.

My apprehension about irreligious writing quickly worsened. I found another leather pouch containing what must have been the collection of a Skeptic teacher. Bound sheets of papyrus and parchment were filled with writings copied from Greek thinkers who questioned the gods.

One was by Aristotle, Dalién's hero. It said: "Men create gods after their own image, not only with regard to their form but regard to their

mode of life." Aristotle, too, was charged with impiety and fled into exile, the document said.

The rest were from Greeks unknown to me:

Euripides: "Do we, holding that gods exist, deceive ourselves with unsubstantial dreams and lies, while random chance and change alone control the world?"

Plato: "He was a wise man who invented God."

Simonides: "The longer I consider the subject of God, the more obscure it becomes."

Xenophanes: "Men imagine gods to be born and to have raiment and voice and body like themselves. But if oxen, lions and horses had hands wherewith to grave images, they would fashion gods after their own shape."

Critias: "It was man who first made men believe in gods."

Hilariously, the writings said the cynic Diogenes cracked a louse on an altar and proclaimed to all within hearing: "Thus does Diogenes sacrifice to all the gods at once."

A fresh scroll of new parchment bore the title *Aphorisms*, by Epicurus of Samos. As I read, I was struck by his clear proof that a merciful god cannot exist, or he would prevent the diseases, tragedies and heartbreaks suffered by humanity. The words were simple and direct:

"Either God wants to abolish evil, and cannot; or He can, but does not want to. If He wants to, but cannot, He is impotent. If He can, but does not want to, He is wicked. If, as they say, God can abolish evil, and God really wants to do it, why is there evil in the world?"

Needless to say, I realized that these documents would bring me punishment worse than flogging. Hastily I hid them under other caravan treasures. I knew that Priestess Eila wouldn't find them, and couldn't read them if she did, because she was the only Amazon who never attended my reading classes.

That night in bed with Litha, as we lay close after lovemaking, I recited the logic of Epicurus.

"It's irrefutable. It doesn't disprove vile gods, or indifferent ones who care nothing about people, but it proves there's no compassionate god who answers people's prayers for relief."

Litha's eyes shone and she nodded.

"Yes. Remember how the Amazons prayed for Celeste and sacrificed goats to save her, when she was dying of her wounds. If the goddesses love us, they would have healed Celeste's misery. But they let her die. So there are only two possibilities: Either the gods don't care if we suffer and die, or they don't exist."

I added:

"Remember the plague that wiped out this farm village, before the Amazons arrived. Imagine all those villagers praying day after day, and sacrificing all their animals, and even a child. But the horrible sickness didn't stop. Only a cruel god would have let them suffer--or a nonexistent god."

Litha put her hand over my mouth.

"Never let anyone hear you say that, or Eila will skin you alive before the goddess statues."

I pulled Litha atop me, enjoying the enchantment of her bare body.

"However," I told her, "if Zeus fashioned such a wonderful creature as you, maybe I will change my mind about deities."

16

Days of Amazon life were mostly alike. Women, girls and slaves awoke and breakfasted on bread, plus milk collected the previous evening from nanny goats in the upper valley. In the summer heat, milk survived unspoiled only a single night. After breakfast we male slaves waited outside our quarters until the Home Queen arrived to assign the day's labors. Then we limped off to the crop fields, the brickmaking spot, the bread bakery and other workplaces. Because of our leg impairments, most of us sat or hobbled as we worked.

Today, my morning duty before my afternoon teaching session was to grind dry wheat reaped from the fields. In the bakery building, long-bearded Ankus and I sat beside a wide stone grinding bowl. Astelle, the chief Amazon baker, scooped a gourd full of wheat into the basin as we pulverized it by rolling round rocks. Then Astelle removed the flour and scooped in more wheat.

At midday Litha brought food and we ate together on the creek bank in the shade of overhanging willows. She was tense with news.

"Mitha has been chosen for her first raid. I fear for her, because she never has fought against men."

Litha explained: During the night, Olandra, the Black Sea lookout, rode back to report an eastbound caravan containing two strings of slaves tied by their necks--one string male, the other female--plus a slave-carried divan of an important person. At the morning warrior drill, Saria organized a squad to ride down the Thermodon Valley and strike the caravan while it camped at night. Mitha, who had been training in horseback combat for a month, eagerly volunteered.

Litha and I stared at each other.

"Mitha never has killed anyone," I said. "Do you think she can do it?"

Litha was silent a moment. She tossed pebbles into the creek.

"I don't want her to be a killer. But that's what warriors do. There's no choice. I was proud when she was picked for warrior training, but now I'm not sure."

That afternoon, as I taught my reading pupils, I was distracted by thoughts of the coming raid. Litha didn't attend my class because she was seeing her sister off with the attack squad.

In the evening I hurried through dinner. I wasn't summoned to an Amazon bed, so I rushed to Litha's room. Anxiety over Mitha had an unexpected effect on us: we clutched each other intensely and made love. Then we fell into a deep sleep.

Next morning we still slept, nude in the muggy warmth, when shouts and sounds awoke us. The raiding party had returned with captured wagons full of loot, including a wagon bearing fifteen freed slave women. Another wagon contained three finely dressed young women, blindfolded as prisoners, with their hands bound behind them. We scurried from Litha's quarters, pulling on our clothes. Mitha spied us and hurried over with a happy report:

"We won without striking a blow. While the caravan lay asleep, we rode in with our swords and axes flashing, all of us whooping war shouts as loud as we could. The terrified guards ran off into the dunes, some of them naked as plucked chickens. They left behind their weapons and everything.

"Queen Saria told the leaders of the caravan--I think they were Arabs--that they could run too or be executed. They knew enough Greek to understand her words, since they had been on a slave-buying trip into Greece. They too fled empty-handed into the dunes. Then Saria told the male slaves they were free to go where they pleased. The Amazons cut off their neck ropes. The men looked confused, but they gathered bags of food and departed in the opposite direction from the caravan guards, heading westward back toward Greece.

"Next Saria told the women slaves they could choose their future: they could depart on foot after the male slaves or they could return with us to join the Amazon clan, where they would be sure of food and shelter. The captives talked among themselves and decided to become Amazons. They really had little choice, because they would have been easy prey alone and defenseless along the Black Sea coast.

"Finally we went to an elegant tent beside the curtained divan. We found a princess from Xanthe with her two maids. The princess was furious. She said she was Lady Xanthia from Xanthe and we commoners had no right to touch a person of royal blood. She said she was being carried to the eastern shore of the Black Sea to become the third wife of a Pasha's son, to bind diplomatic relations between Xanthe and the Pasha. She warned us that both the Pasha and the Xanthe Assembly will send armies to destroy Amazons and free her.

"Queen Saria told her to hush or a gag would be tied in her mouth. Saria said some of our Amazons also have royal blood, being daughters of court concubines. We decided to hold the princess and her maids for ransom. We blindfolded them so they could not remember the path to our hideout."

All around us, Amazons boisterously welcomed the freed slaves to life in the secret female colony. Then the blindfolds and ropes were removed from the three captives. Princess Xanthia, tall and refined, looked around the village with scorn as her group was led to quarters.

Litha and I felt relief that Mitha was home safe and hadn't needed to use her new killing skills.

* * *

In coming days, the freed slaves began attending my reading class, and soon were mastering the Greek alphabet and learning words as most of the Amazon community had done. Princess Xanthia, having enjoyed personal tutors, needed no instruction, and she kept her two attendants close by her side. The captive princess and her maids were allowed to roam the village as they liked. They observed the Amazons at work and play, but refused an invitation to join the nude bathing. At night a sentry lounged outside their building, in case of an escape attempt.

At the next council meeting, I kept notes as Amazon leaders discussed plans to ransom them. Hella suggested that I write a ransom note in large letters for Olandra to post late at night in the main square at Balaris, the port city at the mouth of the Thermodon. Council members debated the type of ransom that might be demanded. After a while the War Queen stood and addressed the assembly:

"Comrades, I have a different thought. We have no need of ransom. If we asked for a hundred gold pieces, what good would they be to us? We cannot spend them in our hidden valley. And it would be pointless to ask for weapons, or garments, or jewelry, or other possessions, because we take all we need from caravans. Instead of seeking ransom, I suggest that we blindfold the captives again and set them free in Balaris late at night, voluntarily liberated by us, as a magnanimous gesture to show outsiders that we are not savages."

Murmurs of assent followed. After brief discussion, the council approved Saria's plan. The following day, Xanthia and her maids were brought before the council. The War Queen announced the decision, adding with a faint hint of sarcasm:

"You will be free to proceed on your eastward journey to become the third wife of a Pasha's son, and you maids can resume your role as royal attendants."

The princess smiled broadly and expressed gratitude. But the maids were silent and looked at each other. After a pause, the taller one addressed the council:

"We have been observing your village and talking privately between us. We have seen free women for the first time in our lives. We beg that you let us join your community."

The princess looked hurt. The shorter maid glanced apologetically at her, but nodded in agreement. Council members consulted each other and voted to accept the maids. It was decided that Xanthia alone would be set free in Balaris. It was agreed that her release would be done three nights hence. In the meantime she was free to partake of village life. She wandered and observed, even joining Amazons in the pool.

An odd thing occurred: On the third evening, Xanthia bade farewell to her maids and mounted a horse, ready to be escorted down the valley to Balaris. Both Amazon queens were on hand to see her off. But the princess looked troubled, uncertain. Just before the blindfold was to be secured, she said "wait!" She put her hands to her face, distressed. After a moment, she took a deep breath, composed herself, and announced:

"I too wish to remain in your village. Even in the Pasha's court, I would not enjoy the freedom you share."

Applause and embraces followed. The maids rushed to hug their former ruler, now their equal.

Later that night, as Litha and I lay in bed, she asked me:

"Do you suppose the council delayed the princess's release for three days so she would feel the spirit of our community and choose to stay?"

"That's exactly what I was thinking," I replied.

17

From her lifetime of privilege, Princess Xanthia wore the poise of nobility. Yet now she strove to become merely an equal in the Amazon community. She sought acceptance by former slave women and concubines. It was touching to observe a "royal" subtly imploring low-caste commoners to consider her worthy of their friendship.

She told the War Queen that she had been taught to ride in her father's palace stable, and wanted to be trained as a horseback warrior. Soon she was sweating in strenuous morning drills with the other women fighters, then cooling naked with them in the pool.

Horseback combat is difficult, requiring special skills. Riders must balance on surging horses, gripping reins in one hand and wielding sword, spear or ax with the other. Horseback archers must drop the reins and use both hands to launch arrows. Holding a shield is almost impossible. Flimsy sheepskin saddles gave the riders little support, and the women clung to their mounts by gripping their steeds with their knees.

Litha and I sometimes watched the horseback training. Mitha had grown expert in galloping with her companions, spearing and chopping stuffed dummies. Xanthia threw herself eagerly into the daily practice. The trainees glowed with spirit as they rode and swung blows.

The princess was so keen for her new role that she lingered often at the horse paddock and its tack shed. Day after day she worked with the horses and their equipment.

One afternoon she asked the village council to meet at the paddock to observe a change she had devised. I came to take notes. Xanthia led out a mare wearing an odd-looking rig. At the front of the saddle she had added a heavy leather ring for the rider to clutch for greater security. But the most remarkable change was two strong leather loops hanging from the saddle, one on each side of the horse.

"I call them stirrups," she said. "When you stand beside the horse and put a foot into one, you can rise easily into the saddle. When you are

mounted with both feet in the stirrups, you have solid control. You feel firm in the saddle. You can rise to half-standing to swing weapons and the horse's movement hardly affects you."

The princess slipped her foot into a stirrup and rose lightly into the saddle. With both feet secured, she cantered in a circle, swinging her sword at imaginary foes. Then she returned to the council and dismounted.

"It looks interesting," the War Queen ventured. But LEEANTHA was dismissive.

"We have fought many battles with our legs loose at the horse's sides. That method has served us well for years. Gripping the horse with the knees gives Amazons strong legs."

LEEANTHA grinned at me: "Right, Melos? You've been held by those legs many nights."

Council members laughed and I flushed.

"Let's be logical," the War Queen said. "Let's test Xanthia's invention. She can use her new stirrups in mock combat against three warriors riding old-style: one test with wooden swords, one with wooden axes, one with padded lances. Volunteers must wear helmets and plenty of padding. We don't want to lose eyes or break bones."

The test was scheduled for the following afternoon. My class was canceled and most of the village gathered at the horse paddock. Since Xanthia was a trainee fighter, she was matched against Mitha and two other trainees, not against long-hardened warriors like LEEANTHA. The women wore thick padding and headgear to avoid wounds.

In the first clash, Mitha and the princess wielded swords. Quickly the advantage of stirrups was obvious. Xanthia rose half-standing and rained blows downward. As the horses wheeled and charged, she had firm control, giving her swift ability to turn and strike. Mitha was whacked by several slashes that would have been fatal in real combat.

Next a sturdy warrior named Comella entered the fray. She and the princess wielded lances tipped with padded knobs instead of deadly metal points. The stirrups enabled Xanthia to lean forward, braced by her feet, with the spear gripped under her arm. Comella had no foot-bracing,

and was toppled to the ground at the first exchange of blows. She landed with a thud in the grass and hobbled to the sidelines.

Third, a tall trainee named Kalleen engaged the princess with wooden axes. Again, Xanthia was able to rise and strike downward, then wheel rapidly and strike Kalleen from behind. Being in greater command of her steed, the princess landed stronger ax chops.

The superiority of stirrups was abundantly clear. Queen Saria declared that all Amazon saddles would be outfitted with them, and with the front grips as well. The assembled Amazons cheered and applauded Xanthia. She bowed, glowing with her new feeling of approval.

That night, for the first time, she summoned a male slave to her bed.

* * *

Two days later, Olandra, the Black Sea lookout, returned to the village with an urgent report for the council. I took notes as follows: A Prince Xanthor from Xanthe came to Balaris with twenty soldiers, searching for the Amazons who took his sister, Princess Xanthia. He offered fifty gold pieces to anyone who could tell the secret location of the Amazons. He posted a written notice in Balaris, where he and his troops lodged in the militia quarters.

The council pondered this news and decided that Xanthia should be informed. When she was told, a pang of concern crossed her face. Queen Saria asked her:

"Would you wish to return to your brother and your former life?"

The princess paused, then said deliberately: "No. I have chosen a better life."

"Would you like to attempt to meet your brother to tell him?"

"How would it be possible?"

"Perhaps it might be arranged. Melos could write a note telling Xanthor: 'If you wish to see your sister, come alone at night on horseback to the rock outcropping on the hill above Balaris. Do not bring soldiers or death will occur.' Olandra could slip into Balaris in the dark and post our notice beside his. Then, some of our warriors could meet the prince by the rocks, blindfold him, and bring him here to our village as you were

brought. The warriors could follow a circuitous path, crossing and recrossing the Thermodon at shoals to prevent him from remembering the way. After your visit we could take him back in the same manner."

Princess Xanthia pondered a while, then replied:

"That would be hazardous. Xanthor might do something rash. And the strain upon my feelings would be painful. It will be better if I simply write him a farewell note, which Olandra can post for him."

I gave the princess a fine piece of parchment. She wrote:

"Dearest Xanthor: I love you and PaPa with all my heart. But I have chosen a different path. I wish to spend the rest of my life among the Amazons, where I enjoy true freedom. My family will not be the Pasha's clan but the Amazon clan. Please do not attempt to find me, because it would result only in harm. Farewell. Your loving sister, Xanthia."

From her neck, she removed a small silver locket bearing her father's image. She instructed Olandra to hang it with the note so the prince would know that the message was genuine.

The council applauded Xanthia for her wise decision.

18

"Did I tell you about the time I was an oracle?" Octos said after dinner.

We all listened eagerly. Evening storytelling was the only relief available to us male slaves--except, of course, for our command performances in Amazon beds.

"When I was still a beardless boy," the grizzled ex-warrior began, "my father took me to the great oracle at Dodona. It was very impressive. We joined a long line of pilgrims. First we had to bathe in the sacred spring. Then we had to pray to Zeus at length. Finally we were allowed to walk one by one up a path through cliffs to the oracle.

"The diviner was a priestess who sat barefoot in a cleft in the rocks, listening to rustling trees in a spot where the wind never ceased. We weren't allowed to see her. Instead we knelt before the priest in charge. He took our gold and silver coins, or in one instance a pearl, and relayed our questions to the seer. Supposedly she went into a trance and interpreted Zeus's voice in the wind. Then the priest came back with her answer.

"Well, it was hokum. My father asked whether the pain in his joints would end. And the answer came back: 'Fear not. Zeus heals all. Open your soul to Him, that He may bless you. Sacrifice a pig at each full moon.' It probably was the same answer given to every sick person. My dad already sacrificed every month, and it did no good. For the rest of his life he was in pain as he stooped to work in the fields."

Octos grinned at us wickedly.

"I never forgot that lesson in quackery. As I grew older, I heard earnest men tell of saving their coins for a year so they could visit one of the oracles and hear messages from the gods. Even before I grew a beard, I knew that oracles were part of the big fairy tale.

"Well, my cousin and I were exploring hills around our village when we found a cave near a crossroads. It hit me that we could get plenty of money. Here's how we worked it:

"We picked one of the gods that few people know about: Erinys the mist-walker. I spread the word to local peddlers: A miracle has occurred. My cousin crawled into a cave above the crossroads and in the cool darkness, Erinys spoke clearly to him, telling him wonderful truths. Erinys promised to return each month around the full moon to answer all questions.

"Sure enough, as the moon waxed, men began arriving. I greeted them in a long robe like a priest and they knelt before me. I stood outside the cave and called the men's questions to my cousin inside. Because of echoes, he couldn't quite understand me, and I couldn't understand his replies, but I invented encouraging answers that said nothing. The odd part is, I never had to ask for money. The believers thrust it upon me. I pretended to have no interest in reward, and said we merely wanted to serve the gods, but they gave enough coins to fill a purse.

"When the second full moon arrived, the crowd was twice as big and we collected twice as much gold and silver. The more we made the petitioners grovel, the more they begged for divine answers. Begging put them in the right state of piety. My cousin and I laughed together in private. But we felt nervous, worried that authorities might hear about us.

"It happened. Before the third full moon, the high priest of Thessaloniki arrived with three armed soldiers. They went house to house, asking the identity of the young men who had become oracles.

"Our goose was cooked. Before the soldiers reached our end of the village, my cousin and I grabbed some bread and ran into the woods. We didn't stop running for three days, until we reached the small city of Kilkis. We gave fake names and enlisted in the Kilkis brigade.

"So now you know how I became a warrior and wound up fighting Amazons, losing a leg, and entering slavery."

A round of chuckles followed Octos's tale. But one young slave, Admer, an earnest youth who often prayed by the creek bank and wore holy amulets around his neck, was visibly troubled. He sat silent, then blurted defiantly:

"The gods are real! Just because you pulled trickery doesn't make the gods a trick. You should pray for forgiveness."

"Son," Octos began, but he paused and shook his head. Then he looked at Admer with tolerance. "Son, I won't tell you what to believe. If you think spirits are real, just keep on praying to them. If you get any results, I'll be happy for you."

The youth grew angrier: "You are laughing at the gods! You will bring a deadly fever or a terrible drought upon all of us. You may not care about your own welfare, but you have no right to inflict the wrath of the gods on the rest of us."

Octos clenched his teeth. "Admer, you are like a child fearing monsters in the dark, monsters that are imaginary."

Young Admer was beet red. He opened his mouth, ready to protest further, but turned abruptly and left our group, his amulets jangling. An awkward silence fell over us. One by one we drifted to our rooms for the night.

19

The Amazons suffered a loss in mid-summer. As the colony's scribe, I recorded this account:

From her post among trees on high ground by the Black Sea, the maimed lookout Olandra observed a dozen cavalymen galloping hastily toward Balaris. Curious, she rode to the edge of the port city, tied her horse among bushes, and slipped to the covert Amazon refuge, a home with two vines. The occupants, a pair of aging widowed sisters, told her the news:

Twenty slave women in the Balaris brothel had revolted. It began when a Balaris assemblyman beat a prostitute who displeased him. Others rushed to her aid and pulled him off her. Enraged, he drew his dagger and killed one of the slaves. Swept by fury, the women clubbed him to death with chairs. Then they realized that terrible punishment awaited them. So they used the dead man's weapons to force other male customers out of the brothel--along with the owner, the Balaris militia chief--and barricaded themselves inside. They armed themselves with every cooking knife and sharp tool they could find. They kept a cauldron of water boiling, ready to pour on any intruder who broke through a barred window. Balaris militiamen formed a siege around the building and sent a courier to bring nearby troops.

When Olandra brought this report to the Amazon hideaway, the War Queen crowed: "Those women have enough grit to be Amazons. Let's rescue them."

Warriors cheered and a raiding party was assembled. Mitha, now ranked among fighting women, saddled a horse with the rest. It was agreed that the Amazons would approach Balaris at night when most of the besiegers were asleep. They planned to leave their horses in nearby woods, along with extra mounts for the freed women, then slip into the darkened city on foot, kill the guards silently, rescue the slave-prostitutes, and whisk them away before other soldiers awoke.

But plans sometimes go awry amid combat. Here is what happened:

From the shadows of a Balaris street, the Amazons saw that just two guards were posted outside the brothel. Racha the Nubian crept behind one in the dark and garroted him quietly. The second fell to an old trick: Wearing a loose tunic, the shapely Aletha, once a temple prostitute, approached with her breasts exposed, smiling like a street whore. The guard was transfixed--until the powerful Leeantha struck swiftly from behind, clamping her hand over his mouth and cutting his throat.

Rousing the women inside the barricaded bordello wasn't easy. The Amazons couldn't bang loudly on the locked doors without waking soldiers in a nearby building. They began soft rapping. Fortunately the trapped slaves had posted a young prostitute, barely more than a child, as an all-night sentry in case the besiegers tried to break in. The girl heard the rapping and woke the others. A whispered conference through a shuttered window convinced those inside that it wasn't a trick by the besieging forces, but that the fabled Amazons had come to save them.

Doors were unbolted and the women emerged. Then the unexpected occurred. A startled dog began furious barking. An Amazon archer silenced the animal, but it was too late. Soldiers peered from their temporary barracks, saw the clustered females, and shouted.

Amazons and freed hookers began running toward the waiting horses, while hastily armed soldiers poured into the streets. The strongest Amazons stayed at the rear to hold the Greeks at bay. Female archers were effective, dropping several soldiers as they burst from doorways.

But other Greeks fanned out rapidly, loosing arrows and spears from all sides. Aletha, who hadn't donned her armor after playing decoy, was killed by a javelin that plunged into her back and emerged from her front. Hulta, the beefy battler, took an arrow in her abdomen and fell groaning. Running with the escapers, the childlike prostitute who had been the brothel sentry died with an arrow in her back. So did another freed concubine.

Soldiers lunged forward and engaged the retreating Amazon rear guard. Leeantha decapitated one with her two-bladed ax. Working in pairs, Amazons caught attackers between them and dealt fatal blows from behind. But a male swordsman killed the tall Amazon Kalleen after

she tripped and fell backward. Another Amazon named Tantia was cornered against a building by three soldiers and chopped to death.

To reach the horses in the woods, the Amazons and freed prostitutes crossed a narrow bridge. Leeantha let them pass to safety, then remained on the bridge, striking down each male soldier who tried to cross. Then she too withdrew to the sheltering trees. When the pursuing soldiers rushed onto the bridge, waiting Amazon archers toppled them. Other Greek pursuers retreated from the hail of arrows. In the darkness the women mounted and fled up the Thermodon Valley. Some of the rescued women, untrained as riders, clung frantically to galloping horses.

Dawn was streaking the sky as they entered our secret enclave. Some dismounted by the pool. Wakening villagers poured out to meet them. The gathering was solemn. One Amazon, still in the saddle, bled from a leg wound, staining her horse's side. Mitha, unhurt, gave me a faint wave from her steed as I stood near the slave quarters.

"Aletha was killed," the War Queen announced flatly. "So were Tantia and Kalleen. And I'm sure that Hulta is dead by now."

Grim silence followed.

"But we took down a dozen soldiers and rescued eighteen from the brothel."

Women came forward to greet the new members of the colony and lead them to breakfast.

As I listened from the edge of the gathering, dismay filled me. Both Tantia and Kalleen had called me to their beds and I remembered them fondly. Not only the curves of their bodies and their rapturous embraces, but also their laughter and nighttime talk flooded back to me. And Aletha had been earnest and appealing as she recounted her escape from temple prostitution. I felt pain, loss, regret. As for Hulta, although she caused me to be flogged, I merely considered her ignorant and did not wish her dead.

That morning, Octos and I were assigned to dig clay from the downstream bank for brickmaking. As I labored knee-deep in water, lifting scoops of clay to the sitting one-legger, I unloaded my gloom upon him. My mentor listened quietly, nodding. Finally he answered:

"Death is as common as birth. It is just part of life. I saw it constantly in the Greek army. The Amazons suffer it in raids. It is expected. Yet it always hurts.

"I don't know why it is so painful, since each of us must die. We all are doomed. There is no escape. With death inevitable, we should resign ourselves to accept it calmly and try to be more helpful to each other while we live. Instead, people pretend that death isn't coming, and go right on battling with neighbors.

"To avoid facing death, people invent heavens and let priests bamboozle them with promises of awaiting joy. They believe it because they desperately want to believe it. But they are lying to themselves. They will die, dead, like every person who ever lived, like every animal and plant. Tania and Kalleen and Aletha met it while they were young and pretty and strong. The rest of us probably will meet it when we are old and sick and feeble. But we all have the same destiny. There is nothing we can do about it."

Oddly, his morbid and depressing talk gave me comfort.

* * *

The following day I observed a difference between males and females. The muscular Leeantha, hero of the raid, was praised by Amazons who flocked around her. With such popular support, a male champion might gather followers and eventually challenge the top commander, seeking to become the new leader. Men crave status and dominance. Rivalry comes naturally to them. But women seem more inclined to cooperate.

In the evening, an outdoor meeting of the council was held at a bonfire by the pool, with numerous Amazons joining the circle. Saria stood with Leeantha and embraced her.

"As you know," she said, "Leeantha fought heroically as we liberated the Balaris women. She is an inspiration to our fighters. I need a second-in-command. I hereby appoint Leeantha my chief lieutenant, to lead our warriors alongside me and take charge if I fall."

Cheers filled the village. Wine flasks were passed among the women as twilight shadows settled.

20

Strange news arrived. Two runaway women, a mother and daughter who had fled from a slave farm in Thrace, reached the Amazon colony via the secret two-vine route. They told of happenings in the outside world, including a report that Amazon warriors had massacred a Greek patrol near the Hellespont, part of the channel linking the Aegean and Black seas.

The village buzzed. Our warriors had conducted no such raid. Evidently a different band of Amazons existed. Rumors of other fighting females had been heard over the years but no evidence had surfaced before.

The War Queen, the Home Queen and the council discussed the matter. As scribe, I recorded their conclusions. It was decided to send two horseback Amazons dressed as young men to visit the land near the Hellespont, a two-day ride to the west. The chosen pair included Leeantha, who had been born in Ionia and knew the language spoken along the eastern shore of the Aegean. Her companion was Theba, daughter of a prince's concubine. They were instructed to avoid men, but to make inquiries at isolated homes where only women were present. Women of the Hellespont region were as subjugated as other Aegean females, the council knew, and they presumably had secrets not told to their male masters.

The pair of searchers loaded food into saddlebags and departed. Remaining villagers returned to the regular routine: tending crops, milking goats, hunting deer, plucking grapes from the vineyard, bathing in the pools, plus nighttime bed duty for us male slaves. Six days passed.

Late in the afternoon, shouts arose. Leeantha and Theba had returned. Riding with them were two proud women on horseback wearing shiny armor. The village poured out to greet them.

"Queen Saria, Queen Hella, council members," Leeantha announced, "I present Queen Aspasia and her companion Edena. They have come to form a bond between our communities."

The riders dismounted and greetings were exchanged. The visitors were shown the village. No interpreter was needed because Aspasia and Edena also were Greek. A large communal dinner was shared by the pool. Wine from the vineyard was poured. Spirits were high. As scribe I was summoned after dinner to record the important exchange.

Leeantha explained how she and Theba found the new Amazon group: "We were fortunate. At the second farm we visited, we met a slave woman whose daughter had run off to join the fighting women. The daughter occasionally slipped home at night to visit. From her, the mother knew that the Amazons occupied an abandoned religious commune in hills near the seacoast. When we found it, we were welcomed as sisters."

Queen Saria told the visitors how our secret colony had been formed by slave women who escaped from Arab traders, and how it grew by raiding caravans, freeing women in bondage, and receiving runaways.

In turn, Queen Aspasia said her colony was smaller and newer, but similar in nature. Standing by the evening fire, she told the assembled Amazons this saga:

"Long ago, my ancestor Aspasia was the most renowned woman in Greece. Of course, it was easy for her to stand out, since other Greek women were sequestered and anonymous. Aspasia was a brilliant young beauty from Ionia, but when she came to Athens she was an alien forbidden to marry an Athenian man. So she became a famous courtesan, a learned hetaera who hosted banquets in her home and also lectured on logic and science. She invited other lovely and intelligent young women to live in her home and become mistresses to important men. They enjoyed partial freedom in a city where most women had none.

"The greatest minds of Athens attended Aspasia's dinners and shared discourse with her. The famed Socrates was her admirer, praising her publicly. Eventually the mighty ruler Pericles visited her home and fell in love with her. Pericles divorced his wife and lived thereafter with Aspasia, adoring her conspicuously in a way that offended Greek custom.

"In witty dinner conversations, Aspasia laughed at Greece's many gods, the Pantheon on Mount Olympus, which she called a ridiculous fantasy. Reports of her skepticism spread among Athenians, especially

among political enemies of Pericles. The comic poet Hermippus publicly denounced her as an atheist and a sexual procurer. The penalty for doubting the gods was death, a fate later suffered by Socrates.

"Aspasia was tried before a jury of fifteen hundred Athenian men. As a foreigner, she was not allowed to speak in her own defense. But Pericles the ruler pleaded for her life with eloquence so moving that he wept. Stirred to pity, the jury released her.

"During the Peloponnesian War, plague struck Athens, killing vast numbers including Pericles. The horrible disease upheld Aspasia's opinion about gods. The great historian Thucydides wrote that pious people who prayed and sacrificed died just as painfully as sinners did.

"Later Aspasia lived with a wealthy sheep dealer. She bore a daughter, also named Aspasia. And that daughter eventually bore another, likewise named Aspasia, and the tradition continued through generations, producing me. From mother to daughter, the fiery spirit of Aspasia, the rebel who laughed at custom, was passed down.

"I was born in the Aegean seaport of Cratos. My father was a small wheat merchant, but crop failure stripped away his wealth so he could not pay a dowry for me to marry. Therefore, on my fourteenth birthday, I was given to the Aphrodite temple to be a sacred prostitute among many living in the holy shrine. With our bodies, we consecrated women served thousands of men for the goddess, especially sailors arriving at the Cratos harbor. We were called priestesses, but in truth we were sex slaves, forced to perform in bed continuously. We earned much gold for the temple and its priests.

"However, after the death of Alexander, a change occurred in Cratos. Sanctimonious men gained control of the Assembly. They banned temple prostitution. The priests found a final way to earn money from the thirty women in their harem. First, all children who had been born to the temple priestesses were sold to be Greek farm slaves. Then we women were sold to an Ionian slave merchant who loaded us into a small cargo ship driven by sails, not oars. We headed across the Aegean for the slave market at Seltis.

"We women were placed in the hold and four armed guards took turns watching our hatchway. A captain and four crewmen handled the ship. One afternoon a storm struck and tossed the vessel violently. We

were miserable in our churning, shuddering chamber. I climbed through the hatch, followed by three other women. We found only one guard on duty and he was seasick, hanging over the gunwale, his weapons lying beside him. In the noise of the storm, he was unaware of us.

"On blind impulse I rushed behind the vomiting guard and upended him into the sea. We grabbed his sword and dagger, and looked for the other guards. We found their cabin, facing onto the deck, just as they emerged, seasick and unarmed. We took them by surprise, flailing with the weapons and heavy wooden buckets. Quickly they too were dumped into the sea.

"Inside their cabin were bows, arrows, swords, shields and dirks. More women emerged from our hatch. We armed all who felt capable of using death instruments. Then we confronted the crewmen, who were struggling to stow the sail they had lowered. They stared at us, surprised to be facing armed women.

"I commanded them to lower a lifeboat, get into it and row away, leaving the ship to us. But they didn't move. They began to protest. Edena and another woman fitted arrows to their bowstrings. With a curse, the burly captain lunged toward us--but fell instantly, shot through by an arrow. The other crewmen backed away, lowered the boat, and departed across the stormy sea. Alone in the ship, we looked at each other, amazed that we had defeated men. Although untrained in the use of weapons, we had won.

"Darkness arrived and we drifted at the mercy of the roiling sea. Unable to do anything else, we crawled into cabin berths and slept. Next morning, the storm was over. In the distance we could see a hilly shore. By trial and error, we managed to raise the sail and steer with the tiller. The shoreline was uninhabited. We sailed up a deep inlet until the vessel was invisible from the sea. The storm had driven us north of Ionia to a region with few people.

"We explored the countryside. On a plateau we found an abandoned farm that once had been a religious commune, centering around a shrine to Asclepius the healer god. Many people believe that if they sleep beside a statue of Asclepius, their illnesses will be cured. But nobody remained in the commune, and numerous graves lined its edges.

We wondered if the commune members perished of diseases, unprotected by Asclepius.

"Like you, we fugitive slave women pledged to form a loyal band, live together, and protect each other. The group chose me as queen. The farm's vineyard and olive grove remained fertile. In a barn we found seeds to replant the fields. We plundered a wheat merchant's caravan for more food, and a horse dealer's drive for steeds. We trained daily with weapons until we became skilled warriors. Thus our history is almost the same as yours."

When Queen Aspasia finished her account, the gathered Amazons applauded. The time grew late and women began retiring for the night. Hella the Home Queen explained to the visitors that male slaves in our village are ordered into the beds of Amazons. She offered my services to Aspasia or Edena, but both said they were fatigued from the long day of riding and preferred to sleep alone.

21

On the second day of her visit, Queen Aspasia met with our village council, and I recorded the proceedings. It was agreed that the two Amazon communities would form an alliance for mutual aid. It was further agreed that raiding should continue, to liberate women under bondage.

"My group was scheduled for sale in the slave market at Seltis," Aspasia noted. "Perhaps we should visit that market and free its women."

Applause followed. The council quickly approved. A plan was drawn. The raid was scheduled seven days hence, when a full moon would make night travel easier. It was agreed that Saria would bring ten warriors plus extra horses for the freed women, and Aspasia likewise would bring ten from her colony. The two parties would meet at dusk at a eucalyptus grove north of Seltis, then slip to the slave market at night to release the female prisoners.

To gain divine favor upon the raid, Priestess Eila sacrificed a white goat with ribbons decorating its horns. After the sacrifice, Queen Aspasia and Edena departed for home.

The War Queen trained her fighters vigorously for the coming mission. Mitha was not selected for the squad, and her self-respect suffered. She was dejected as she joined Litha and me for noontime food on the creek bank.

"I have grown strong and my archery has become accurate. I feel hurt that they don't rank me among the ten best."

Litha soothed her: "Deep in your heart, Mitha, you still are not a killer. Saria can see it. That's why she posts you often to sentry duty. As your sister, I know you completely and love you for what you are. It is better that you avoid bloodshed unless it is absolutely necessary."

The War Queen led her unit from the village and the rest of us resumed our daily routine of dawn-to-dusk labor. We wondered how the slave market attack was proceeding.

Seven days later, Saria returned with all her warriors plus three freed women. As the village flocked around, she announced proudly:

"It was easy. Our plan worked perfectly. The slave market was at the edge of the city, with only one sleeping guard, who was eliminated without noise. Only thirteen slaves were locked in the women's chamber, and all of them chose to ride to freedom with us. We also unbolted the chamber for male slaves so they could flee as they wished. Seltis and its militia didn't awake.

"Ten of the women chose to go with Aspasia's group, because her village is closer. Three decided to make the longer trip back to the Thermodon with us. Before our two groups separated, we agreed that Leeantha and I will return to their hidden farm at the next full moon to plan further actions.

"On our return trip we often rode in creeks or grassy fields or rocky flats, to leave no tracks in case Seltis soldiers tried to follow us."

The three freed slave women were welcomed, fed, and shown to quarters.

* * *

Day followed day in the village. My afternoon classes--which had dwindled after most of the women and girls learned to read and write Greek as well as I--swelled again with newcomers from the Balaris brothel raid and the Seltis slave auction rescue. Like their predecessors, the new females learned rapidly.

On some days I was assigned to light duty: patrolling the vineyard to scare birds away from the ripening grapes until it was time to pick them, stomp them in a vat at the winery, and pour the juice into sealed urns for the mysterious change into wine. My nights followed their usual pattern: On evenings when I wasn't ordered to an Amazon's bed, I rushed to sleep with Litha in the novice quarters, sharing the joy we felt with each other.

As the next full moon approached, the War Queen and Leeantha set out on horseback for Aspasia's colony near the Hellespont. They were gone six days. Then they returned to our village with somber faces, and with a wounded young woman riding double behind Leeantha. We gathered around them in silence.

"We have bitter news, very bitter news," Saria declared. "Soldiers from Seltis evidently tracked Queen Aspasia's group home from the slave market raid. When we reached the Amazon farm, we found only death. Eleven bodies were on the ground. Aspasia and Edena were among them. The rest of the women had been hauled away to slavery. Leeantha and I lay the bodies side by side in a stone hut like a mausoleum. As we started to leave, a voice called to us from the granary and we found this survivor with an arrow through her leg."

The rider behind Leeantha wore bloody wrappings around her thigh. She addressed us in flawless Greek:

"I am Pendilee. I was among women freed from the Seltis market. Two days after we arrived at Queen Aspasia's village, soldiers stormed out of the woods and struck us so swiftly that only a few women had time to resist. When the arrow entered my leg, I fell into bushes and crawled under shrubs to hide. I heard the soldiers killing wounded women and taking the rest away. The commander said they would be sold in the great slave market on the island of Delos, a terrible place where I once was sold. After all was silent, I crawled out and lived on grain from the granary and water from a tiny creek, until I heard your friends' voices."

Amazons helped Pendilee dismount and escorted her to food and a bed.

A morbid mood pervaded our Thermodon village. Our new friends were dead, and we saw clearly what would occur if Greek soldiers discovered our hidden location.

22

When Pendilee's leg had healed enough for her to walk with a cane, she went before the Amazon council to introduce herself. I recorded her account:

"My father was captain of a small cargo ship plying the great sea beyond Crete. With a crew of five men, he hauled wheat to the eastern shore and returned with Arabian horses. During his absences, my mother tended my little sister and me in our home in the seaport of Piraeus. When I was thirteen, Father brought Mother, sister and me along on a sea voyage. We slept on the floor of his cabin beside his bunk.

"One sunny afternoon a larger ship approached. No pirates had been seen in these waters for years, yet Father suspected brigands. He steered for land but it was futile. The approaching ship scraped against us and was made fast with hooks. Twenty armed pirates climbed over the railing. Father's small crew didn't resist, because it would have been fatal. All of us were dragged to the larger ship and locked in its hold, where we found ten other captives. Some pirates remained on Father's ship, keeping it as booty.

"For several days we lived in the dark hold, aware of little except the slap of waves against the hull. Pirates brought us bread and buckets of water. For our bodily functions we had a hole through the lower deck into the bilge.

"Finally the ship stopped and we were led out into blinding daylight. The vessel was in a harbor, tied to a pier. Thongs around our necks connected us in a human chain and we were lined up on the wharf. A rich-looking man with armed guards arrived and examined us thoroughly. Slowly we understood that we were at the island of Delos, home of the world's largest slave auction. The pirates were selling us to a dealer. Bags of coins changed hands and we were led away.

"Our pathetic procession stopped beside an enormous building made of stone from the rocky island. Guards disconnected some of our neck thongs, separating men and women into two chains. Father called

out to the dealer: 'I am a ship captain. I have Greek cousins with money. They can ransom me, my wife, and our daughters.'

"The dealer eyed him with no more feeling than a fishmonger selling a carp: 'I have heard your plea before. If I kept you for ransom, months would pass and no money would arrive. But I can have a fine profit tomorrow in the auction.'

"The men couldn't resist because they were surrounded by guards with swords. Bound by their necks, they were led through a doorway. That was the last time we saw Father.

"Our female string was led into the cavernous structure, past many small stone rooms with bolted doors. We were shoved into an empty room and the bolt clunked behind us. In the darkness, all we could do was sit on the floor and talk. We concluded that slaves were locked in separate chambers in small groups so that we could not form a mob large enough to overpower guards and escape. Finally we slept on the hard stones.

"Next morning we were fed bread and water by the slave merchant's guards and led to a bathing chamber. Our garments were stripped off and we were washed down with sponges, like livestock about to be displayed at a fair. The guards brushed our hair and inspected us. Mother, I, my small sister, and the other women stood helpless, naked, still tied by our necks. Through a doorway we could hear voices and the chant of an auctioneer.

"Our group went on sale. A woman's wrists were bound before her, then her neck was untied and she was led nude to the auction hall. After the auctioneer's prattle ceased, guards returned for another woman. Mother looked agonized as she was taken. She glanced back at her two daughters and sobbed.

"My turn came. I felt vulnerable and degraded as I was led naked into the grand arena. A large circle of men surrounded the auction block. I looked in vain for Mother, but she had been sold and led away. I soon realized why my wrists were tied: so I could not wrap my arms around myself to cover my body. My wrist thong was hooked over a high peg, stretching me at full length before the bidders. I was hung up like a side of beef.

"Buyers approached and felt my body for firmness. My breasts had barely grown, yet they were checked repeatedly. Two buyers opened my mouth and examined my teeth. One knelt and poked into my crotch to verify my virginity. They wanted to assess the merchandise before venturing their money. The auctioneer began his rapid spiel and bidders raised their hands.

"A thick-set man with a ragged beard made the highest offer for me. I was led to his holding pen at the rear of the hall. It contained three other women he had purchased, but no men. We stared at each other, pondering our fate. I didn't see my sister sold. I never saw her or Mother again.

"We learned that we had been bought by an Ionian leather merchant who wanted only women workers for his tannery because he feared that men might revolt. His three sons, wearing short swords, became our guards. Our garments were fetched from the bathing chamber and we dressed. We were tied again by our necks and marched back to the wharf, where we boarded a vessel and sailed to Ionia.

"The vile-smelling tannery was on the outskirts of Ephesus, well away from people's homes. We were lodged in slave huts and assigned the filthy task of scraping hides from the slaughterhouse, stretching them in the sun, then soaking them for months in vats containing a dark broth of water and oak bark. Fumes from the vats were sickening. The merchant's sons, armed and carrying leather whips, policed us constantly.

"During our work, the merchant or a son frequently took a woman by the arm, led her to the wash room, stripped and bathed her, then took her to a bed chamber in the merchant's villa. Any hint of reluctance on the slave's part brought a sting of the lash. Thus I lost my virginity to one of the sons on my third day at the tannery.

"Older slave women told me to beware of the merchant because he enjoyed whipping his sex partners. I soon learned the accuracy of their warning. Among ourselves, we slaves made bitter jokes about which was worse: the smelly tanning vats or the smelly masters. Raw humor provided our only relief.

"One day a full-bodied slave woman spotted a deadly asp in weeds behind the tannery. With a forked stick she pushed it into a leather

pouch and drew tight the cord. She looked at me grimly and said: 'The next time he lashes me in his bed, I will give him a special gift.'

"It happened the following day. From our work posts we heard the merchant shriek and saw the woman run naked from his door. But she did not get far. Two sons seized her while the father staggered from the villa with a dagger. He stabbed her to death, not thinking of the money wasted in losing a slave. The nude woman lay in the dirt, her legs twitching in death spasms. Then she was still. The sons carried their father back inside, where he died.

"In coming months the tannery business slumped. Unsold leather slabs overflowed their racks. Our work pace slowed. Some of the women said it was because the sons were incompetent merchants. Others said it was because a rival tannery rose in Ephesus.

"Finally the sons decided to recoup losses by selling six of us at the Seltis slave market. On horseback, a son led us in a human chain on a three-day walk to Seltis, where he received a bag of gold coins from a dealer. For a second time I was locked in a small room with other women, waiting to be stripped naked and put on the auction block, to be prodded and inspected by buyers. But you Amazons rescued us in the darkness before it happened.

"Since my capture at sea I have known only abuse and degradation. Now I want my life to have purpose. When my leg heals, I beg that you let me train as a warrior. I want to ride with Amazons so that I will have a reason for living."

Women of the council stood and applauded.

23

A hillside behind the village contained a ragged cliff. At its base lay a deep pile of flat stones that had fallen from the outcropping over many years as tree roots dislodged them from the strata.

The War Queen, quite realistic about the life expectancy of combat fighters, decided that a stone vault should be built to house her body, in readiness for the day when she didn't survive an armed clash. For her final resting place she chose a dry, elevated spot not far from the cliff.

During a lull before harvest time, we slaves began tomb-building. We heaved the flat rocks onto our shoulders and carried them to the vault site. Since one-legged Octos couldn't carry, he served as mason, sitting while he fitted the stones together. After he made a smooth floor, he began the walls. From our brickmaking pit on the creek bank, Ankus carried gummy clay for mortar. Day after day we proceeded, under supervision of Saria the War Queen, and the tomb walls rose.

As stones were removed from the cliff base, we discovered a grotto that had been invisible behind the rubble. Soon we could peer into its dark interior. As more rocks were carried away, we could see that the chamber had been a shrine, long ago, for former villagers who occupied the valley before plague drove them to flight.

Being small, I crawled into the little cave. A smooth stone wall was chiseled with an outline of Demeter, goddess of the harvest. Before her was a wide rock, a sacrifice altar. As my eyes adjusted to the dimness, I could see the half-burned bones of sacrificed animals piled in a corner of the grotto. The priest of the former villagers had offered many gifts to Demeter, hoping for bountiful crops.

Slaves carried more rocks away from the entrance, letting in more light. Admer, the devout young man who wore sacred amulets around his neck, crawled in to join me. He moved toward a dark alcove--and shrieked. I rushed to him, and was horrified. Lying in the alcove, side by side, were skeletons of five children.

We scrambled out of the grotto and related our gruesome discovery. As word spread, Amazons came to the scene. We removed more flat stones, flooding the interior with light. Athletic LEEANtha clambered inside with Admer and me behind her. Our throats clutched as we neared the small skeletons. Polished pebbles and shiny bits of crystal lay among them, indicating they had been dressed in finery as sacrifices. Sickeningly, each little skull bore a hole in the front. Death on the altar had been inflicted swiftly by a priest wielding a sacred implement. We felt stunned and retreated from the grotesque place.

"The old villagers must have been desperate," LEEANtha told the circled Amazons. "Maybe there was no rain at the start of summer and they feared starvation, so they offered a child to Demeter, and then another. Or maybe the sacrifices were done during five different summers."

Silence fell over both Amazons and slaves. From the corner of my eye, I watched Admer, the devout believer. I wondered how he felt about this supreme act of faith. But he only stared at the ground.

As we left the blighted place, I remembered that my boyhood friend Rectus had told me of children being sacrificed to Greek gods. I asked Octos, my counselor. Vaguely he recalled tales of human sacrifice, but said they seemed only legends.

I wanted to learn about the monstrous custom. I hurried to my teaching room and dug through parchments from caravan raids. First in one document, then another, I found various reports, as follows:

When Greek colonies suffered plague, it was a custom for two scapegoats--a man for the colony's men and a woman for the women--to be stoned to death as sacrifices to alleviate the disease.

King Erechtheus of Athens, at war with Thrace, consulted the Oracle at Delphi. The Oracle warned that Athens would lose the war unless Erechtheus sacrificed his lovely daughters. He did so, and the tide of battle favored Athens. During the time of Pericles, when the great Parthenon temple was built to Athena, the long frieze was carved with this sacrifice scene.

Lykaon sacrificed a baby on an altar to Zeus.

At the start of the Trojan War, the Greek fleet was stalled by unfavorable winds. So King Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigeneia to appease the goddess Artemis, and the winds changed.

During the Trojan War, when the Greek hero Patroclus was killed, the mighty Greek warrior Achilles sanctified his funeral by sacrificing captured Trojan soldiers.

At the end of the Trojan War, to sanctify the funeral of Achilles, Greeks sacrificed Polyxena, daughter of the fallen King Priam of Troy.

When next I saw Octos, I related these hideous accounts. He shook his head and said: "How many evils has religion caused."

24

"War is noble, the test of a true patriot," Arctinus declared to our after-dinner circle outside the slave quarters doorway.

A sturdy hulk, he had been a longtime soldier, a squad leader, before Amazons shattered his knee in fighting near the Bosphorus and dragged him into slavery.

"Every nation is admired for its strength, its power," he continued. "The weak are contemptible, objects of ridicule. Strength and power come from weapons and the will to use them. That is the glory of Greece."

Unsure silence ensued. I knew that Arctinus was partly right, yet his words disturbed me. He pressed on:

"Why was Alexander called The Great? Because he did not hesitate to hurl armies across the world, slaughtering the mighty Persians and all other enemies. He united Greece into the strongest fighting machine humanity has known and spread our domain to the ends of the earth. His Macedonian Greeks were magnificent. They could crush not just the Persians but all the demons of Hades. Alexander gave us Greeks triumph and made Greece renowned forever."

My mentor Octos interjected:

"Arctinus, we both have chopped young men to death on the battlefield. Perhaps you find that glorious, but I do not. I was sickened by it and remain sickened to this day."

Arctinus turned defensive: "Patriotism does not permit such feelings. A patriot serves his homeland, without question, without fear, without debating his orders. A full army or a small squad must fight and kill precisely as commanded to ensure success. That's patriotism."

Finally I mustered enough thoughts to speak.

"What about the young Persians who died by thousands? Were they patriots to their land?"

"They were the enemy! Alexander and all the councils of Greece declared them aliens to be conquered. A Greek patriot needs to know nothing more."

"In other words," I said, "if leaders say 'fight the Thracians,' a patriot goes forth to kill Thracians--and if leaders say 'fight the Spartans,' a patriot rushes to kill Spartans? And anyone who questions these commands is unpatriotic?"

"Exactly," Arctinus snapped. "It has always been thus."

I continued: "Now that we Greeks have conquered Persia, do you feel exalted as the owner of a foreign land? To tell the truth, I never heard of Persia before I moved to Kavopolis."

"Melos, you are not a warrior so you cannot understand patriotism. You are a scribbler on papyrus. You don't feel the passion of fighters willing to sacrifice their lives for their homeland. Sometimes I doubt that you are a Greek. You seem to enjoy being a slave of the Amazons, enemies of Greece. Have you become their pet?"

Three other ex-soldiers, friends of Arctinus, laughed. I fell silent. Arctinus was correct: I could not understand patriotism that drives strong Greek men to massacre strangers who did them no harm. Why do men and kingdoms behave this way? Why do so many tribes battle other tribes?

"You're right," I finally told Arctinus. "I don't understand the war urge. I don't belong in this discussion." I excused myself and retired to my room.

* * *

One structure in the Amazon village was off-limits to male slaves. It was the armory, a hut beside the warrior quarters. Except for daggers and other side-weapons worn by fighting women, the community's killing power was locked in the hut. It contained most of the swords, shields, bows, arrows, spears, maces and other death instruments seized from caravans and Greek troops over the years. It also contained the weapons for which Amazons were renowned: small, double-bladed battleaxes, easily swung by women. Years before, the female fighters had driven off the crew of a foreign galley that ran aground at the edge of the Black Sea. In its hold they found dozens of the lightweight iron axes, and adopted

them. Male armies of the region never were known to use such small choppers.

Also, the colony's mowing sickles, butcher knives, hatchets, pitchforks, leather awls and other dangerous tools were kept in the locked armory.

Each morning the War Queen and her fighters armed themselves from the hut for practice on their hillside training ground. Then the weapons were returned and an armed warrior stayed near the armory during the day. At night an Amazon always slept in the armory to guard the killing implements. She bolted the door from inside and was forbidden to invite a male slave to her bed. The reason for this constant watch wasn't spoken openly, but the purpose was obvious: to prevent male slaves from arming themselves for a revolt.

One morning, rain interrupted my work in the bean field. I returned to my chamber and dozed. Soon I was awakened by voices in an adjoining room, close to my ear. Although exterior walls of the slave quarters were of mud-straw bricks, some interior partitions were only lattices of woven reeds, no barrier to sound. I heard Arctinus murmuring, presumably to his three soldier allies:

"We will be Greek heroes. We will be rewarded as patriots."

I strained to hear. His comrades muttered. He continued:

"Malleus has a thin bone shard that can be slipped through the armory door crack at night to lift the bolt silently. If we eliminate the sleeping Amazon without noise, we will have their stash of weapons. We can sneak through the warrior quarters in the dark and kill them in their beds. Then nothing can stop us from taking horses and galloping out of this valley into the night."

Agreeing murmurs followed. Actinus added:

"We will be hailed in Kavopolis as true soldiers. A Greek regiment will rush back here and cleanse the rest of this bandit nest."

I felt panic. If the soldiers knew that I had overheard, they might kill me to protect their plot, because they deemed me an Amazon sympathizer. I lay deathly still, barely breathing. Soon I heard them leave the adjoining room, and I heard other slaves likewise returning early from the soaked fields.

My panic expanded. I did not want Amazon warriors to be murdered in a slave uprising, nor did I want the rest of the village to be massacred by a returning Greek regiment. Arctinus was right: I had grown fond of our captors.

My mind raced. I could not think what to do. If I warned the War Queen and Home Queen, armed Amazons would plunge into the slave quarters to kill at least the Arctinus group and perhaps others. I would become a hated traitor to fellow slaves, probably marked for death. But if I didn't warn the women, all of them might be killed.

I could not confide in Litha because she would be honor-bound to inform the Amazons. I could not confide in Octos because he remained a soldier, although a disillusioned one, and might tell Arctinus that his plot had been overheard.

I sweated and paced, because every choice seemed impossible. I must do something, but what? The dilemma rested solely on me. I couldn't seek guidance from anyone. Yet I must act, purely alone.

During my afternoon class, I barely heard my pupils' questions. When dinner arrived, I tried to appear casual among the slaves, but my pulse pounded in my ears. After dinner I didn't join in storytelling, but took my cane and walked by the creek. I didn't go to Litha; I let her assume that I had been summoned to an Amazon bed.

That night I couldn't sleep. My mind churned. At times my panic rose until I thought I might vomit. Near dawn a solution came to me. I remembered that hefty Hulta, before her death in Balaris, always fed Baloo, the tracking hound who lived in a box beside her room. With Hulta gone, other Amazon warriors fed him. After daybreak, before breakfast, I hurried to the warrior building and approached Saria with a lie:

"My lady, before the Balaris raid, Hulta told me to move Baloo's box to the armory doorway, so the hound will provide extra protection for the weapons. Hulta's death made me forget, but I just remembered."

The War Queen, busy viewing a map of the Black Sea shoreline, nodded distractedly: "Good idea. Do it."

While the rest of the village remained half asleep, I dragged the heavy doghouse to the armory and placed it by the door. I tied Baloo's leash to it. Thus he became the armory's four-legged sentry, baying when

anyone neared the door. No uninvited intruder could get inside without his clamor, which would alert nearby warriors who could rush to the spot with their side weapons. At night his barking would wake the sleeping Amazon inside as well as those in the adjoining barracks.

That evening I saw Arctinus and his three soldier friends staring at the guard dog, looking perplexed. I said hello cheerily as I passed them.

* * *

I thought that my cleverness had ended the escape dreams of Arctinus, but I was wrong. A few days later, while he was picking olives in the grove, he found a strong tree limb and fashioned it into a long club. He kept it near him as he worked. A young Amazon, training for horseback combat, rode by the grove on a lower trail just below the spot where the lame slave was at work. From behind shrubbery, Arctinus swung the club and knocked her from the steed. He grabbed the horse's reins, lunged into the saddle, and galloped toward the mouth of the valley in a headlong dash for freedom.

If the girl had been knocked unconscious, he might have succeeded. But she sat up, clutching her head, and shouted for help. Two other Amazons practicing horseback fighting tactics in the main pasture heard the uproar, saw the fleeing Arctinus, and galloped in pursuit.

The women riders were swift but they couldn't overtake the runaway. As the chase entered the lane through the downstream thicket, the foremost Amazon yelled to the sentry above the cliff: "Drop the barrier!"

As an added safeguard, Amazons kept a tall pole standing upright in a notch of the cliff, with the upper end beside the sentry. It was always poised so the sentry could give it a push, toppling it across the secret lane at shoulder height, creating an obstacle for any intruders. Mitha, who was on duty atop the ledge, shoved the pole, dropping it before Arctinus's escape horse. The frantic fugitive saw that he was trapped, but had no time to react before the two pursuers were upon him with flailing axes. He was beheaded instantly.

With a long strap tied to a saddle, the Amazons dragged his headless body to a remote part of the thicket and dumped it into brush. Then they returned to the village, carrying his head and leading his

escape horse. The head was placed on a stake outside our slave quarters. No Amazon gave us a lecture about it. None was needed. The message was clear.

Several days later, after everyone had seen the consequences of the escape attempt, the War Queen ordered us to remove the head and bury it in the latrine pit near where Dalien's body was covered.

That evening, Octos gave me another dose of his sour wisdom:

"Melos, here's a simple fact most people refuse to see: Soldiers are killers. They're trained to kill. They're armed to kill. The only purpose of an army is to kill opposing troops. All the flag-waving patriotism can't hide the gory truth about warriors. Arctinus was a prime example. He lived by the blade and died by it."

I thought about his comment, then answered: "Since every land arms its young men to slay the young men of other lands, doesn't this show that humanity is crazy?"

"Yes," Octos replied. "But it's ingrained in us. There's something inside people that makes us relish fighting and killing. Look at all the proud paintings and sculptures of battle scenes. Listen to the bards chant the glories of conquerors. They rouse war feeling in people, especially young men. It's patriotism. People have a fighting spirit, and admire warriors. War supporters seem strong, heroic--but war opponents seem weak, spineless. Thus we lunge into battle."

"I still think it's crazy."

"You're right, of course," Octos said. "People are sickened by war, yet they secretly crave it. Their blood stirs for it. Humans are loony."

25

Just as affluent Greek men order favorite slave women to their beds at night, Amazons developed preferences among male slaves. For example, tough-minded Saria, the War Queen, enjoyed rough-and-tumble nights with one-legged Octos, the cynic who suited her no-nonsense, no-romance style. She permitted him to speak freely and he made her laugh. She called for him often.

We slaves who served as Amazon concubines came to view bed duty somewhat as work. Although delightful, it was a required chore about which we had little choice. It could be laborious, since we were required to continue our attentions, one way or another, until each Amazon was satisfied. With some such as the athletic LEEANTHA, it came quickly. With others like THEBA the prince's daughter, we needed endurance. It was a task.

Some Amazons grew bawdy and boisterous about sex. One day my work assignment was to haul dried bricks from the downstream clay pit to the granary, where another wheat storage room was being built. I used a pony and a small wagon, booty from a caravan raid. As I rode past the large Amazon pool, nude bathers were sunning themselves on the grassy bank.

"Melos," Pendilee called to me. "Don't exhaust yourself. I need vigorous attention from you tonight."

Her companions laughed and cheered. I smiled and waved, but deep inside, part of me felt fatigued by the prospect of another romp on command.

Such bed duty had nothing to do with my private yearning for Litha my soulmate. I suppose that female prostitutes and concubines in all lands feel much the same: that bed is a workplace. For such people, sex and love are separate.

However, in one unfortunate instance, my on-command bed obligations brought trouble to Litha and me.

"I never summon a different man, only you," she said pointedly one night after we made love. "But you go to many women."

"I have no choice. Slaves can't refuse."

"Tell me you don't enjoy them."

"I swear it," I teased.

"You're mocking me."

"Seriously, you're the only woman I truly want. I spend every free night with you."

"Yes, but how do you think I feel on the other nights, lying here alone, knowing that you're climbing onto an Amazon?"

"I know, but what else can I do?" I looked at her squarely and added in earnest: "If fate ever gives me a chance, I will abide only with you."

She seemed partly satisfied and gripped me tightly.

In coming days our devotion for each other remained strong, even though nearly half of my nights were consumed by calls to Amazon beds. Then an unforeseen problem occurred, as follows:

Near the center of the Amazon village, the bakery stood taller than other buildings, with a flat roof reachable by outside stone steps. On dry summer nights a warrior was assigned to sleep there on a pallet under a horsehide canopy. She served as an extra sentry, the first to be awakened by any disturbance in the sleeping community.

After Mitha became a warrior, she was allowed to summon slave men as she wished. Of course, she never chose me because of my bond to her sister. Instead, she developed a preference for Andor, a big-muscled former Greek soldier who gave her ecstasy in bed. On nights when he was taken, she picked other large slaves.

One night at dinner, a girl messenger delivered my orders: I was to bathe and go to the Nubian Racha, who was assigned to sleep on the bakery roof. I obeyed. But after I limped up the outside steps, I was surprised to find Mitha sitting on the roof pallet, naked in the moonlight. We stared at each other awkwardly, confused.

"I called for Andor," she blurted.

"He was sent to Eila. Why are you at the bakery? I was told to meet Racha here."

"Comella became ill and couldn't serve as sentry over the cliff, so Racha was sent in her place. And I was told to sleep on this roof in Racha's place."

I averted my eyes from Mitha's curving body, but I couldn't stop myself from stealing glimpses. We were silent, unsure.

"Damn!" she muttered. "I was tingling with anticipation."

"We can't hurt Litha."

"No--you're right, of course."

More silence. We felt clumsy. I couldn't avoid staring at her full breasts, shining in the moonglow. She didn't try to cover herself. Finally she put her hand on my arm.

"Melos, I need a man."

"But Litha would be upset."

"We won't tell her. It's of no consequence, just a roll in bed like your visits to other Amazons. I'm merely another nighttime assignment."

I hesitated, weakening. She continued:

"We both know that your heart belongs to Litha. This won't change anything. It won't mean a thing."

I was easy to persuade. She pulled off my clothes and we plunged into lovemaking with surprising fervor. We were like animals. Perhaps our worry about Litha magnified our feelings. Afterward, we lay together, breathing hard, covered with sweat.

"Remember," she said, "say nothing to Litha."

"Of course not."

I didn't remain with her all night, but returned to the slave quarters and slept like a stone.

Subsequently I discovered--like many men, I assume--that women are mind-readers. Litha looked at me oddly but said nothing. Finally, as I arrived at her chamber one evening, she confronted me:

"Something happened with you and Mitha."

"What? What do you mean?"

"When we eat on the creek bank, you don't look at each other."

"Well, uh--"

"It's very obvious."

She was growing agitated. I choked and felt my face burning. I stammered. She pressed on, eyes blazing:

"Tell me you didn't sleep with her."

I tried to lie but my mouth wouldn't say the words. I sank down, exhausted.

"My sister! How could you? You prick!"

Angry tears filled her eyes. I cringed, feeling like an insect. She wouldn't stop.

"How could you betray the trust between us?"

I mustered enough nerve to answer:

"There was a mixup. I was ordered to the wrong bed."

"Well, why did you proceed? Why did she?"

I felt great concern for Litha and wanted to embrace her, but she probably would have struck me in the face.

"Mitha was in need, and it was no different from my other Amazon orders."

"It was different! She's my sister!"

Litha sobbed. She pushed me out the door and barred it behind me. I felt helpless. I sat on her doorstep, hearing her soft sobs in bed. Eventually I wandered back to the slave quarters, but couldn't sleep. Frantically I tried to think of a way to undo the harm, to win her back.

Bright moonlight lit the village. I set out to try the only remedy I could envision. I went to my teaching room, lit a lamp, got papyrus, and wrote:

"Litha, I love only you. I want no other. I will spend all my life with you if I can. Please forgive me. Melos."

I returned to the novice building and slid the sheet under her door. Then I went to my room and slept.

I didn't see Litha next day, or the next. I searched for her around the village. Then I met Mitha, who looked at me with concern.

"Litha was sent back to the shepherd cottage on the hill," she said. "Before she went, she told me of your confession and your note. She's angry at both of us."

"I didn't confess. She saw right through me."

Mitha smiled. "Men are so obvious." She continued:

"Don't worry. Time softens these hurts. Litha will forgive you, and me too. She is carrying your note in her tunic close to her heart. She loves you. That's why she was so upset. If you were casual to her, she would have shrugged. When you see her again, woo her as strongly as you can."

Mitha was correct. When Litha returned to the village, I rushed to her, imploring. At first she stayed aloof. But I followed her, begging. Her face softened. We went to the creek bank and talked a long time. We pledged to be faithful to each other, to the extent possible under our difficult circumstances.

26

"Do you understand how Alexander and his Macedonians gained control of Greece? It was because of the Great Sacrilege and the Third Sacred War."

Long-bearded Ankus, eyes glistening, launched another of his explanations of affairs of state. Our after-dinner circle listened intently. Predictably, crusty Octos interjected sacrilege of his own:

"I remember that war. It was over riches taken from the gullible by Delphi priests."

Ankus pressed on:

"Well, uh, yes. At the Delphi shrine, thousands of people, even kings and generals, came to hear Apollo answer their deepest questions through an oracle. The seekers first purified themselves by praying and bathing in a holy spring. They brought gold, silver and jewels as offerings to the god. The oracle priestess sat in a grotto, half in a trance, and spoke in an unknown tongue. A priest interpreted her strange words as Apollo's replies. Often the answers were mysterious and baffling, yet the questioners felt that divine revelation had flowed to them.

"As the fame of the Delphi oracle spread, wealth reaped by the priests grew so large that treasuries were built along the path to the temple. The riches of the Apollo shrine were known far and wide.

"Mountain people living around Delphi, the Phocians, had a record of trying to seize part of the gold for themselves. Twice before, their greed caused the first and second Sacred Wars. Each time, they grabbed the temple, and each time they were defeated by troops from the league of cities controlling the shrine. But the Phocians always felt that Delphi belonged to them, so they seized it once more.

"The Third Sacred War changed everything. I was fighting as a mercenary for Thessaly then. But we were no match for the Phocians. With wagonloads of gold from the Apollo treasuries, they hired a strong army of mercenaries who kept us from entering the Delphi region. And

the Phocians squandered other treasure among themselves, giving silver to the king's cousins and bedecking strumpets in precious stones. When reports of this theft spread, religious Greeks were horrified. That was the Sacrilege of Delphi.

"All of Greece's great cities had been bled by constant wars and were too weak to send large armies. So Thessaly asked King Philip in Macedonia, up north, to send troops to avenge Apollo's honor. He did so, and the Third Sacred War began. Philip's son Alexander had just been born at that time.

"The conflict continued year after year. Twice the Macedonians were driven back north, but they kept returning with bigger forces. We Thessalonian mercenaries skirmished against Phocians, but Macedonians waged the major battles.

"It was a holy war, fought for religion, but I saw many unholy things. The slaughter was ghastly. Corpses lay everywhere. Farms were burned and families massacred. When my brigade captured a Phocian village, the soldiers dragged young women out onto the green, stripped them naked, and raped them. The females might have been killed but our commander halted the sport before it reached murder. The soldiers also looted everything of value from village homes. We were told that Macedonian troops did likewise, and Phocian mercenaries did the same when they took Thessalonian villages.

"In case you are curious, I didn't violate any Phocian woman or loot any home. I felt sorry for the screaming women, but I could do nothing to stop the spoils-taking."

Octos broke in again: "Sacred wars are just as monstrous as other wars. A priest will say they are righteous, but that's bunk."

Ankus continued:

"When the Macedonians finally triumphed, King Philip ordered three thousand Phocian prisoners drowned for the sacrilege against Apollo. The defenseless men were driven at swordpoint into a river and kept offshore until they sank. Their corpses filled the stream as far as the eye could see.

"The Third Sacred War gave Philip control over north-central Greece and he brought in more armies. By then, Alexander had grown to

a bold teen-age commander, his father's pride. Athens and other cities saw that northerners were seizing the land, so they sent armies to resist, but ten thousand Macedonians in full battle array cannot be stopped. Resistance was crushed and Philip ruled almost all of Greece. Only Sparta showed defiance, but it was bypassed.

"The old order of feuding Greek cities ended and a unified land resulted. But Philip barely began to reign when he was assassinated by a crazed guard, and Alexander became supreme. We all know how he led both Greece and Macedonia in the mightiest conquest ever known, before he died young."

Our slave circle applauded Ankus for his grasp of momentous events. Octos delivered another sarcasm:

"If priests hadn't filched all that wealth through the oracle, there would have been no gold to steal, so the Third Sacred War wouldn't have occurred, and the Macedonians wouldn't have been invited--thus Greek cities could have continued fighting each other, like the bad old days."

We muttered sardonic agreement. Twilight had fallen over the Amazon valley. We drifted into the slave quarters to our bunks.

* * *

The following day, I again worked with Ankus in the bakery grinding flour.

"I never knew that you were a mercenary for Thessaly," I told him when we were alone. "How did you become an Amazon captive?"

He wiped wheat dust from his beard and told this tale:

"The army commanders saw that I had a keen mind, so they trained me to make accurate maps for the military. I studied with a smart old surveyor who knew how to measure hills and valleys. He taught me to count my paces over long distances, and to gauge faraway locations by holding a template at arm's length, so its notches matched the height of a far-off man, revealing the distance. Most of all, he taught me to use a dioptra, with two movable sighting tubes and a protractor to measure the angles of different lines of sight. Soon I could make reliable maps.

"I was ordered to chart the Thermodon Valley and was sent on horseback to join a small Greek patrol there. By coincidence, I arrived just

after the patrol had captured an Amazon. She had been riding along a valley trail, disguised as a boy, but her posture on her horse looked suspicious, so the Greeks surrounded her. She tried to run but they forced her into a cove and trapped her.

"It was evening when I reached the patrol's camp. The Amazon was on the ground beside the campfire, face-up, her outspread arms and legs tied to stakes. She glared at her captors, saying nothing. The patrol leader told me of her capture: 'We know that she speaks Greek, because she cursed us up, down and sidewise when we seized and bound her.'

"The leader said that, after dinner, he would use glowing coals from the fire to torture her into revealing the hideout of her Amazon clan. He introduced me to his men. We ate and drank wine around the cheery blaze. Some of the men taunted the tied-down woman, and tossed pebbles at her. She glowered in silence.

"Full of wine, a large soldier stood and asked the leader: 'Before you burn her pretty skin, let me have her.' Other soldiers cheered and laughed. The patrol leader nodded with a grin.

"The big soldier drew his dagger, lurched to the supine captive, and cut off her garments. He tossed the slashed clothing into the fire, telling her she wouldn't need it any more. The naked woman jerked against her ropes, watching him with blazing eyes like a trapped panther. Everyone in the camp stared at her bare body. We almost held our breath, awaiting the rape.

"Standing over her, the soldier peeled off his tunic. He was unlatching his belt when a whiz came out of the darkness. An arrow pierced his chest. He stiffened and his mouth fell open. His knees buckled and he went face-down into the dirt.

"While he was falling, arrows whizzed everywhere. The leader beside me was pierced through the abdomen and screamed. Soldiers jumped to their feet, yelling, but several were cut down. I felt terrible pain as an arrow went through my thigh. I fell and crawled toward bushes.

"Women warriors rushed out of the darkness, swinging double-bladed axes. Thuds and screams filled the night. It ended quickly. I heard women calling each other and spearing wounded soldiers.

"Then I heard them laughing with the naked captive spread-eagled by the fire. One told her that if the Amazons had attacked a moment later, they would have shot the rapist in his upturned rump. The prisoner chortled as they cut her loose.

"Two warriors took blazing limbs from the fire and searched the campsite. They found me under bushes and dragged me back to the group. I expected death, but the women decided that I would become a slave instead. They pulled the broken arrow from my leg and tied a thong to stop the bleeding. I was hoisted onto a horse for the trip to this colony. That's how I came into servitude.

"Incidentally, the captive by the fire was Comella, the tough, funny, bawdy warrior. After my leg healed, she summoned me to her bed one night. As a joke, two other Amazons stripped me and tied me down, face-up and spread-out as she had been. Comella climbed onto me naked. She said she wanted to repay the hospitality she had been shown in the Greek army camp."

Ankus and I laughed. I'm sure that he, too, felt affection for our owners.

27

Again the Amazon Moon waxed full, and again I was selected to be Eros in the lusty ritual on the torchlit altar with the naked Priestess Eila. But on the appointed evening there was no moon. Dark storm clouds spread overhead, ending daylight early. As I washed in the lower pool and hurried to the shrine, distant thunder rolled closer and lightning began.

The open-air temple had a small roof covering the painted wooden statues of Aphrodite, Hera and Artemis the huntress. As I arrived, Amazons were stretching a horsehide canopy from the roof to nearby trees, to extend a rain shelter over the love pallet before Aphrodite. Torches were lit. Their yellow light was pierced randomly by white flashes from the approaching storm.

Temple aides peeled off my clothing and lowered the Eros mask over my head. I flushed with excitement. Teasingly, one attendant tweaked my exposed genitals as if to improve my sacred performance. But the inducement wasn't needed. Eila removed her headdress. Just as a loud thunderclap shook the village, she opened her robe, revealing her luscious body in the torch glow. I burned with anticipation.

As the nude priestess raised her arms to the statue and chanted her Aphrodite prayer, rising wind lashed her hair around her face. She donned her Aphrodite mask and reclined on the pallet. I knelt between her outspread legs. As I entered her, the fury of nature shook our tableau. Wild gusts whipped the horsehide canopy like the sail of an imperiled ship. Flurries of rain swept under the roof, splattering us and the watching Amazons. One of the torches sputtered out, but the others cast gleams on Eila's writhing body and the transfixed faces of the watchers.

The storm didn't ruin our ritual. Instead it heightened it. Our lust was extreme. We were savages. Eila's wet form glistened as she shuddered, her damp hair streaking her face. Her look of passion turned to pained ecstasy. Then she clutched me fiercely and cried out. Spasm after spasm rolled through her. I joined her in violent release. We

slumped so limp that we almost became unconscious. Murmurs of approval rippled among the observers. I barely remember staggering to my feet, walking through the downpour to the slave quarters, and sinking onto my pallet.

As sleep swallowed me, I pondered the dual pulls drawing me two directions at once: I love Litha completely, yet my command performances with other Amazons can be tantalizing.

* * *

Next morning, rain continued briskly and the village suffered distress. Water washed over walkways and entered doors. The muddy creek roared swiftly, almost out of its banks. We slaves were awakened early and sent without breakfast to carry objects to shelter. Amazons scurried to rescue their favorite things. Little girls watched the excitement.

Abruptly, childish shrieks erupted. A section of creekbank had collapsed where tots were watching. Tiny Bella, big-eyed daughter of the construction chief, tumbled into the torrent. She was swept downstream, half underwater, screaming when her head emerged.

Muscular Andor, Mitha's favorite, had been working beside me. Without a word, he dropped the sodden pallets he was carrying and lunged to the creek. The burly soldier dived headlong among cracking limbs and groped for the girl. On the third try, he caught her wrist, pulled her to him, and held her head above water as they careened downstream.

The whole village was in mad pursuit. Other slaves ran along the bank, trying to reach the floaters. Then Ankus arrived with a long leather strap and flung an end to Andor, who caught it. The slave and tot were pulled to safety.

The stolid construction leader, tears streaming, ran to the bank and clutched her daughter desperately. The little girl clung to her mother's neck and wailed. Then something remarkable occurred: The mother handed the child to Ankus and embraced Andor gratefully. Assembled Amazons cheered. The slave looked embarrassed. Mitha, her eyes shining, rushed to Andor and held him passionately. He looked more embarrassed. Other slaves grinned.

The mother carried Bella back to their quarters. We slaves resumed saving village items from the deluge.

That evening, with calm restored, the village council summoned Andor. I recorded their lavish praise as they rewarded him with a gold chain and five days of work-free leisure.

Next day, as Octos and I repaired horse harness, he philosophized:

"Deep down, there is no master or slave. We're all just people, and our human instincts are alike. A general, even a prince, might have done exactly what Andor the lowly slave did."

I nodded. "That's how it is during a crisis. But when the crisis is over, the rulers resume supremacy."

Octos sighed. "Melos, dammit, you're growing as cynical as I."

I pondered in silence, then added:

"Regardless of who outranks whom, when Andor risked his life to save that child, I felt proud to be a human."

28

Darkness is total in the Amazon village at night. Except for red embers from the evening bonfire and faint lampglow from a few windows, black shrouds all.

The engulfing dark brings to life a nighttime wonder: the sparkling picture display in the sky. From the habit I learned from Grandfather, I scan various star patterns. First I observe the dipper of the Great Gourd, then trace a line from the end of its cup to the North Star, the fixed pivot around which the rest of the night sky slowly revolves.

Farther south is the invisible band plied by the moon and wandering planets. Night after night I observe that the moon is fatter and farther east as it waxes. Roving planets dot the moon's path, forever changing. Each evening I note their locations, first before the advancing moon, then trailing behind it.

Along the path of the moon and planets are star designs. Twelve of these constellations appear one after another during a year, and slowly cross the sky in line with the moon's course, each remaining visible for about six lunar cycles.

Among the scrolls captured from caravans, I found one on astronomy, citing the studies of Eudoxus. It applied the name "zodiac" to the thin band occupied by the moon and planets. The parchment contained drawings of the twelve constellations and told the Greek legend behind each. They become visible at night somewhat in this sequence:

Mid-autumn: Aries, the winged ram whose golden fleece was taken by Jason.

Late autumn: Taurus, the bull. Zeus became a snow-white bull to seduce a princess.

Early winter: Gemini, the twins, named for Castor and Pollux, twin sons of Zeus.

Mid-winter: Cancer, the crab that was crushed by Hercules.

Late winter: Leo, the lion that was strangled by Hercules.

Early spring: Virgo, the virgin, named for a daughter of Zeus and Themis.

Mid-spring: Libra, the scales, marking the balanced time of the equinox when days and nights are of equal length.

Late spring: Scorpio, the scorpion that killed Orion the hunter.

Early summer: Sagittarius, the archer who aimed an arrow at Scorpio to avenge Orion.

Mid-summer: Capricorn, the goat, named for the goat that fed the infant Zeus when he was raised in secrecy, and also for the goat-horned Aegocerus, who accompanied Zeus to battle the Titans.

Late summer: Aquarius, the water-bearer, representing Ganymede, cup-bearer to the gods on Mount Olympus.

Early autumn: Pisces, the fishes. When Aphrodite and Eros were pursued by a monster fish, they changed into fishes and swam to safety.

A calendar in the night is formed by the constellations as they arrive year after year after year.

There is wonder in contemplating the majesty of the heavens. People who watch the dark sky see four different tableaux: the nightly rotation around the North Star, the monthly moon phases, the wandering planets, and the yearly march of figures across the zodiac. Awe and humility are instilled by the never-ending display.

* * *

Another caravan raid occurred on a hot summer night as Leo was rising. At daybreak, Saria and her warriors returned with wagons of loot and fresh horses. Sitting in one of the wagons, bound hand and foot, was an odd-looking captive. He was plump and pale with thin hair and large eyes like an owl. When Amazons untied him and helped him to the ground, his legs bore no wounds, unlike other male prisoners. He was ungainly, with feet pointing outward as he walked.

"This is our new slave," the War Queen told the gathered villagers. "We don't know why he was in the guard tent of the caravan. As we stormed the encampment, the other men fled into the night, leaving him

behind. He was struggling to don armor when LEEANTHA whacked him on the head with the flat of her ax. He's the most pathetic guard we ever saw. His legs, such as they are, have not been damaged, but we doubt that he is likely to escape. We will find slave work for him, but he probably won't be summoned to many beds."

Laughter rippled among the women. One Amazon joked: "A chubby fellow might be interesting, as long as I'm on top." More laughter. The plump stranger was led to our slave quarters. We showed him to a pallet to sleep before we began our daily tasks.

That night, as slaves returned from the fields, he joined us for dinner. Several of us introduced ourselves. He responded:

"My name is Augur. I was astrologer to the Assembly at Thessaloniki, but I departed."

He seemed reticent. We prodded him with questions, asking how he became a caravan guard. Finally he loosened:

"I studied astrology many years under the great master Zakarus, who also divined by casting bones. I learned his skills thoroughly and he recommended me to become his successor in Thessaloniki. But I met with misfortune."

We begged Augur to explain. He stalled, but took a deep breath and proceeded:

"I foresaw a summer of bounteous crops. The Assembly was pleased. My prediction was sound: all the planets aligned perfectly for a rich harvest, and when I cast the bones, they fell in complete agreement. I can't understand what went wrong. A terrible drought came, plunging the people of Thessaloniki into hunger. Bitter mobs filled the streets. The Assembly was forced to send a regiment into Macedonia to raid granaries and bring wheat to our city.

"Scornful Assembly members ordered me into the army. But commanders wanted only strong fighting men, so I was assigned to guard caravans. And now I am here." He looked around sheepishly.

I glanced at Octos, who was smirking. But we both held our tongues and didn't guffaw at the bumbling mystic who could foresee nothing, not even his own capture by Amazons.

Next day, Augur was assigned to beginner work: pulling weeds in a vegetable patch. After dinner I told him I was the village scribe, with access to scientific writings on astronomy.

"The parchment by Eudoxus explains how the zodiac figures appear one by one and remain visible about half a year each," I said. "But it says nothing about using them to foretell the future."

Augur grew animated: "The stars rule our lives. The gods placed them as beacons to light the path to truth. Our fate can be found in the constellations and the planets traveling through them, if we interpret the signs properly."

"But how can tiny lights in the night sky change events here on earth?"

"The gods don't explain their mysterious powers. We simply must be wise enough to discern their message."

I pressed on: "What about tossing bones? Don't they fall differently with every throw?"

"Yes, but only the first toss, after deep prayer, reveals the future."

"Well, why didn't the stars and bones foretell the drought?"

"I don't know. I erred. But Zakarus had died and I could not consult with him to discover my mistake."

I excused myself. I saw that conversation between us was unlikely to bring enlightenment.

Before long, Augur became fast friends with Admer, the devout young slave who prayed by the creek. We often saw them together drawing star diagrams in the dirt, tossing bones, and murmuring prayers with their eyes closed. One evening they were grim-faced and silent. They sat apart from the rest of us. I approached Admer and asked if there was a problem. Admer looked to Augur with his eyebrows raised. Augur nodded, giving permission for the youth to disclose their secret.

"The stars and bones say the end of the world is coming," Admer said solemnly. "Time is very short. Just four days hence, during the half moon, doomsday will bring the end of time."

I stared at them. I didn't laugh because I didn't want to hurt their feelings. It was clear that they were quite sincere.

"That's astounding news," I said. "Shall I inform the others?"

"No," Augur said. "It wouldn't change the outcome and it might cause panic. There is nothing we can do except prepare ourselves through prayer."

I thanked them and promised to remain silent.

The half moon came, and went. Nothing happened. Village life proceeded as usual. I waited several more days before I told Octos about the ridiculous prophecy. He cackled and shook his head.

"No prophet ever foresaw anything," he said, "yet they never stop looking for magical signs."

However, the failed prophecy, along with the multitudes of prayers and sacrifices that produce nothing, caused me to confront my religious dilemma again. A couple of evenings later I approached my mentor for another theology session.

"Octos, if astrologers are silly, and gods are fairy tales, and priest explanations of the world are nonsense, what is the real answer? Why are we here? Why do we die? Why do the heavens roll forever? What made the stars and the earth? Is there a purpose? Is there a meaning?"

The grizzled slave eyed me keenly.

"You still are pondering the ultimate question. It's the riddle nobody can solve. Priests claim to know divine answers, but they speak gibberish. Wise thinkers have debated this puzzle for eons, but they find no solution, just perplexity. An honest person can say only: I don't know. That isn't a satisfying answer, but it is the only one you can say truthfully."

Several days later, as Octos and I sat on the creek bank at dusk, he delivered another profundity, a more lighthearted one.

"Melos, I will tell you a great truth: All men are ridiculous. All men. Not just sappy astrologers and chumps with magical amulets around their necks, but you, me, and the rest. We're all absurd."

He paused, then continued:

"Women can see it. Deep inside, they laugh at us. They know we are idiots."

After a moment, he added:

"I suppose that women are ridiculous too, in their own way. But they're so strange, so mysterious to us, that I really don't know anything about women."

I mulled over his sarcastic observation. It seemed wise, but I wasn't quite sure. I could think of no reply. We sat quietly in the gathering dusk. Then he lurched onto his crutch and hobbled into the slave quarters to bed.

29

Like many pious people, Admer was prim about sex. His prudery became obvious to his bawdy slave companions, who teased him. On the rare evenings when he was ordered to an Amazon bed, lewd ex-soldiers derided him at dinner: "Admer, just pretend that she's a temple hooker and you're doing it for the gods." Or: "Relax, Admer. A curvy woman is the finest creation of the deities, so pay your respects.'

Sanctimonious people seem comical to regular folks. But I think they're also sad, torn between their natural human desires and guilts imposed by religion. The depth of Admer's inner torment soon was to be revealed.

* * *

Most Amazons once were mistreated possessions of Greek men, and now the order is reversed: the men are possessions. It's remarkable that the women don't inflict retaliatory cruelty on us. Instead they show a certain indulgence.

One evening, when I hoped to cling to Litha, I was summoned instead to the familiar arms of the sturdy construction chief. She grinned as I knocked at her bedchamber. She peeled off her robe in the lamp glow and pulled me to her ample body. But she added a caution:

"Don't give me a baby or I will break your scrawny neck." At her order, I withdrew at the last moment and finished her with my fingers. She shuddered and gasped, then sank limp on her pallet.

Unlike my ecstatic ritual with the priestess in a lashing storm, this was another time when I felt that my sex-on-command duty was more work than pleasure.

* * *

Sometimes I wondered if pregnant Amazons who bore male babies grieved when the boys were sent to slave traders after being weaned. In private, Litha, Mitha and I pondered this question, but we

couldn't reach a conclusion. Amazons were well-disciplined, rarely showing any painful feelings.

As for girl babies, their lives followed this pattern: At first, each newborn slept beside her mother's pallet, suckling frequently. New mothers were spared part of their warrior training and work assignments during the nursing phase. When the girls were big enough to toddle and eat solid food, they spent days in a playroom tended by a kindly matron. The mothers resumed full daytime duty and slept by their daughters at night. The whole village raised each girl. All women cooed and patted the tots, yet it was understood that this intimacy slowly would recede under the colony's communal lifestyle tinged with military regimentation. At age six, the children moved into a girls' building headed by a firm supervisor, and ceased living with their mothers.

One of the small girls was Deena, five-year-old daughter of Astelle, the chief baker. Deena was adorable, scampering barefoot around the village. Chirping earnestly, she often engaged us male slaves in discussions about winking fireflies, rainbows, croaking frogs, and other wonders. The whole colony loved Deena.

One afternoon, as Admer and I split firewood for the bakery oven, we heard children screaming near the creek. Deena had climbed among rocks, where a deadly adder bit her on the leg. An older girl killed the snake with a stone. Deena's mother became frantic. Admer and I carried the child to the bakery and attempted to suck out the poison. Deena seemed numb, and shivered. Admer fell to his knees, kissed his amulets, and prayed fervently for her. Amazons came running from many directions. Eila the priestess took command.

"We must offer sacrifice so Hera will save her," she barked. "Prepare a white goat."

Younger Amazons ran up the valley with a leather rope and returned leading the bleating goat. Admer and I scrubbed it spotless in the creek. Women braided a garland of flowers for its neck. The bewildered animal was led to Hera's altar.

While Amazons performed the sacrifice, Admer and I remained with the circle around the sinking girl. She seemed paralyzed and her arms fell limp. The priestess returned in her headdress and recited intense prayers over Deena: "Mighty Hera, queen of goddesses, we have

given you a fine offering. Please show your infinite mercy by sparing this innocent one."

The child became unconscious. Her mother sobbed while other women held her. My soul sank as it became clear that Deena was growing lifeless. Eventually there was no breath or heartbeat. Tragic silence fell over the group. After a painfully long time, Leeantha brought a wooden box and the little body was lifted into it. Deena was carried to the bonfire site by the Amazon pool. As dusk came, a fire was lit and mourners surrounded the small coffin.

It was a morbid night. Little was said by any of us, Amazons, slaves or children. Litha and I sat on a bench near the slave quarters, holding each other silently, feeling sick as we watched the grieving circle in the flickering firelight.

Next morning, Admer and I were sent to dig a small grave on the knoll. He was silent, wearing a strained look. When I spoke to him, he seemed not to hear me. We left and Amazons conducted Deena's burial.

That evening as Litha and I walked by the creek, we saw Admer in the distance. He was not kneeling in prayer this time. He stood pressing his fists against his head. As we approached, he removed his sacred amulets from his neck and flung them into the creek. He turned to us with a distraught face.

"I've been an imbecile. A dolt."

Litha put her hand on his arm. I started to speak, but he blurted:

"All these years I've prayed to Zeus endlessly. And I've slept with his holy amulets around my neck. And when I was young, my family made sacrifices every month and visited oracles. We were the most devout family in our village. But for what? It's a waste, because it's all make-believe. The gods aren't real. I've been a fool. I feel like killing myself."

"Wait, Admer," I began, but he rushed onward:

"The sacrifice and prayers for Deena did nothing. There was no goddess to help her. And what kind of gods would make adders to kill little girls, anyway? It's all fairy tales. It was stupid of us to think that gods would come to her rescue."

He paused, then continued:

"Augur's Doomsday prediction was another absurdity. We were idiots. I don't know how I could have believed such magic all my life. And remember Celeste, who died from her wounds while goats were sacrificed for her. Only morons would think that killing goats would cause goddesses to save her."

Another memory came to him:

"And remember the skeletons of the children who were sacrificed to the harvest goddess. Their deaths didn't make crops grow. It's horrible that parents killed their children for an imaginary god. Horrible. Horrible."

Litha hugged his shoulder and I held his hands. It seemed to calm him.

"Admer, don't feel upset," I said. "It's natural to believe, because everyone tells you that gods are real. All the kings and priests and assemblymen and bards and generals and village leaders. From the time you're born, they praise the gods every day. It's normal to accept it."

He looked at me sourly. "It wasn't normal for you and Octos. You weren't sucked in. Why was I?"

"Well, a few of us are misfits," I assured him. "Octos and I don't belong among regular folks. We're outsiders."

I felt pity for the devout young man who had lost his faith. It was painfully touching. Admer was quiet a while. Then he concluded:

"I think I have become an outsider too. I'll never pray again or lead another sheep to the altar. If I did, I would see Deena's face and know that invoking the gods is folly."

I groped for words to soothe him. "Admer, nobody knows why adders wait to kill little girls. All we know is that nature can be horribly cruel. We don't know why it's cruel; we simply must live with it, trying to keep children as safe as possible."

We didn't want to leave him alone by the creek. Litha took his hand and we walked back to the slave quarters together as the sun was setting. Luminous red streaks filled the western sky. Within myself, I felt that the sun also was setting on Admer's life of piety.

30

Oona was the shortest and smallest Amazon warrior, yet she was known for her feisty spirit. In combat she darted like a hornet among male soldiers and her sting was as painful.

Twice she summoned me to her bed at night, and each time was a rowdy romp. She pinned me face-up and rode astride me with exuberance, her breasts bouncing. We laughed together as we fell into exhaustion.

She had been raised in a Greek colony on the Black Sea coast, daughter of a farm laborer. When she was fourteen, she was sent to marry a forty-year-old man whose first wife had died of plague. Oona's father could afford only a small dowry, so her new master felt that he had received cheap goods and treated her accordingly.

The husband, a builder, eventually moved to an easterly colony, taking all his possessions, including Oona. As their caravan proceeded along the coast, it suffered a midnight raid by Amazons. The builder ran off into the dark with the guards. Left behind, Oona begged to join the victorious women. They welcomed her and, despite her smallness, subsequently let her enter warrior training. She was deemed somewhat a mascot among the fighters, although she was as lethal as the rest.

One evening at dusk, Oona dressed as a boy and departed on a brief assignment: to fetch a runaway girl from the two-vine sanctuary outside the village halfway down the Thermodon Valley. She rode one horse and led another for the newcomer. But they didn't return by dawn and the colony worried that something was wrong.

When they hadn't arrived by noon, the council held an emergency meeting. I recorded the assembly's decision: If Oona wasn't back by dark, a second warrior would be sent with orders to approach the two-vine home cautiously and try to learn what had happened. Nightfall came with no trace of the missing fighter.

Racha the Nubian, almost invisible in the dark, was chosen to seek Oona. Our colony went to bed uneasy, awaiting Racha's findings. At daybreak, she returned with the runaway girl riding double behind her. Racha told the council a grim report which the old woman at the two-vine home had learned from other villagers. I recorded her account:

"Oona never reached the safe-house. In the dark, her horse stumbled in a hole. She was thrown and knocked unconscious. The second horse ran off down the valley. A platoon of Greek warriors, camped nearby at a log barn, heard her horse shriek with a broken leg. With torches from their campfire, they went to investigate. They killed the doomed horse, saved its saddle and bridle, and carried the unconscious rider back to the barn. Soon they discovered that the "boy" was a woman with leather armor and weapons under her cloak: a hated Amazon.

"They bound her and hung her by her wrists from a tree limb, too high for her feet to touch the ground. They revived her with water splashes. Her wits returned and she realized she was trapped like a hare. The Greek commander feigned cordiality and promised that she would be freed if she revealed the location of the Amazon hideout. She mocked him and made jesting replies.

"The interrogation turned ugly. Soldiers poked her with dagger points and cut away her clothing until she hung naked. She spat on them and refused to answer questions. She kicked any soldier who came within reach, tumbling one briefly into the campfire. The men laughed and jabbed her with long sticks, some afire at the tip. Daylight arrived and villagers came to watch the torture spectacle.

"The commander gave Oona an ultimatum: reveal the hideaway or be a target for archery practice. She scorned the poor aim of Greek bowmen, saying they probably would hit their horses tethered nearby.

"On command, five archers lined up with their bows. The officer gave her a final chance. She hooted. The officer gave the order to shoot. The first Bowman loosed an arrow, but she lurched and eluded it. She also ducked the next one. But the third pierced her thigh, and the next her abdomen. She didn't cry out, giving her tormentors no satisfaction. The fifth arrow entered her right breast, exactly in the nipple, and protruded from her back. She shuddered and sagged limp in death. 'Bull's-eye,' a

soldier said. But the others were silent, as though ashamed of what they had done."

Amazon council members were enraged by the report. The heat of their anger filled the room. When the War Queen suggested a quick revenge attack before the Greeks left the valley, there was no vote, just a roar of agreement. Word flashed around the Amazon village and volunteers rushed to form a large cavalry squad. Mitha armed herself, saddled a horse, and hurried to join the vengeance troop. Deliberately, the War Queen delayed the assault.

"It's only noon," she warned the assembled throng. "If we gallop out now in a rage, we will encounter the Greeks in daylight while they are armed and mounted. We might suffer severe casualties. We must employ cunning, striking them in the dark when they are unprepared. We will eat a large midday meal, then all of you will bathe in the pool to reduce the risk of festering wounds. We will ride out quietly in late afternoon, so the shadows of dusk will cloak us as we search for the light of their campfire."

The warriors knew that their commander was correct. They released the horses to graze. As the women fighters ate, Saria walked from group to group, coaching them on tactics they might employ in the evening battle. At her command, all the women stripped and bathed in a crowd that nearly overflowed the pool. They made bawdy jokes as they scrubbed each other.

The sun was dipping low on the hilltops as the mounted band of well-fed, well-washed, well-armed women rode out of the hidden colony. Litha and I waved farewell to Mitha and silently wished her luck. With so many women gone from the village, I wasn't ordered to an Amazon bed, so I spent the evening in Litha's wonderful embrace.

We were awakened next morning by the sound of returning horses. We rushed out to see the revenge troop riding tall, leading a string of captured Greek horses, including two pulling the supply wagon of the Greek unit. The wagon was piled full of weapons and garments taken from the enemy. Sadly, it also contained the shrouded body of Oona. A senior Amazon, Kella, a council member, had a blood-soaked binding on her arm. All the others seemed unhurt. Mitha rushed over to tell Litha and me:

"We hid in a grove and spotted the Greeks still at the log barn. They were drinking wine around a fire after dinner. Oona's body still hung in the tree like a grotesque trophy. At Saria's command, we charged them at a gallop, screaming with rage. We killed a few as they scrambled to their feet, and the rest ran into the barn. We surrounded them and posted archers to shoot anyone who came out a door or window. The Greeks had some bows inside the barn, and shot at us through cracks between the logs. Beside me, Kella suffered an arrow through her arm.

"Saria hatched a plan to burn them out. Shields were hooked together with poles through their straps, making full-length protection that allowed warriors to walk forward safely. I was one of those who marched up to the barn. We took burning limbs from their bonfire and put them against the logs. Soon the barn was flaming. Some Greeks ran out but were killed the moment they burst from the door. Others stayed inside, coughing and screaming, and died when the blazing roof fell on them. We massacred them all, every one of the bastards. Then we cut down Oona's body, gathered their horses and supplies, and hurried away into the dark before any villagers came to the scene."

That afternoon we slaves dug a grave and Oona was buried on the knoll. For several days a mood of grim satisfaction was felt in the Amazon colony. But the War Queen, with LEEANTHA by her side, delivered a warning to the council:

"We were lucky. We caught the Greek platoon half-drunk, still at the barn, in the dark, with no sentries posted. We showed the outside world that Amazons may not be tortured and executed without consequence. However, such good fortune may not occur if we ever let passions stampede us too quickly into revenge attacks.

"Our colony has survived many years because we act wisely. We never attack a large male force in daylight, because most of our women would die. Instead we raid at night, striking by surprise, then vanish into the dark and hide our tracks to our refuge. We are pleased by the outcome of our retaliation. But we must always remember to outthink our enemies, enabling us to outfight them."

31

Inner peace grows from the closeness of lovers. My nights with Litha were pure contentment. As we lay together, serene after lovemaking, I stroked every part of her bare body. She kissed the scars of the wounds that make me limp.

"I will heal your knees magically like the god Asclepius."

"Your magic is better than his."

On another hot night, we again slipped naked through the dark village and swam in the lower pool. After we made love on the grassy bank, she murmured in my ear.

"You have given me a baby."

"How can you tell?"

"I feel it."

"You're feeling your desire for a baby."

"Perhaps."

One day we acquired a new companion. As we shared our midday meal on the creek bank, we were joined by Tildee, four-year-old orphan daughter of the warrior Tantia, who died in the brothel raid. Since her mother's death, Tildee had lived in the children's dormitory with older girls. She had curly black hair, big dark eyes, endearing earnestness, and much curiosity.

"Why do butterflies have spotted wings?" she asked.

"Well, uh," Litha muddled, "maybe it's so they will look like the flowers they visit."

Having learned the hard way that I mustn't offer views that might seem irreligious, I answered: "Eila the priestess says the gods made them with spots."

Tildee pondered in silence, wriggling her bare toes in the sand.

"Why do we have toes?"

Again Litha fumbled, then stretched out her hands.

"It's like having fingers. Many creatures have separate fingers and toes. But horses and goats don't. Nature is very, very interesting, don't you think?"

Tildee nodded solemnly. Once more, I was cautious:

"When Eila teaches you girls about the gods, ask her these things."

Tildee climbed onto my lap, shared part of my bread, and did the same with Litha. We both hugged her. Then she toddled away barefoot toward the children's building. Litha and I smiled at each other, and she had a glint of tears in her eyes. We felt a need for children to love and tend, almost an ache.

"Nature doesn't just make toes and butterflies," I said. "She also causes adults to love the young."

Litha put her arm around my waist and leaned her head on my shoulder as we sat side-by-side on the bank, watching the creek ripple.

* * *

Autumn drew near. Lands along the Black Sea enjoyed a breath of coolness. The vaguely sad mood of the dying summer clung to the hidden valley of the Amazons. But we male slaves had no time to savor the season, because we were thrust into the wheat harvest, a period of exhausting labor.

First we knelt with iron sickles and cut swatches of wheat. We tied a few stalks around each swatch, making sheaves. Then we stood the sheaves together in clumps, grain upward, to dry. Next we carried the bundles to the threshing floor, a wide limestone ledge swept clean. We rolled smooth logs and round stones over the wheat, dislodging the grains. A slave was posted continuously at the threshing spot to drive away hungry birds.

Then we winnowed, using broad tortoise shells to toss the mix into the air so that wind blew away the chaff and straw, letting the heavy grains fall back into our scoops and into the deepening layer of grain below. Finally we put the dry wheat in mouse-proof pottery jars at the

bakery and in a well-sealed granary room. After winnowing, our sweaty bodies and hair were caked with chaff, and we washed in the lower pool.

The harvest took several days. Each night we were too fatigued to tell tales after dinner at the slave quarters, but fell rapidly asleep. Mercifully, the Amazons saw our condition and did not order any of us to their beds during the harvest. Afterward, the routine of village life resumed.

* * *

Late one night, Olandra, the coastal lookout, returned to the colony, bringing two slender young runaways who had followed the secret conduit of two-vine homes. They were welcomed, fed, and shown to bed. Next day, they were presented to the village council. As scribe, I recorded their accounts.

"We were servant-concubines of a Kavopolis merchant," the taller one said, gesturing with both hands. "But he was fat and unpleasant. When we didn't show enough adoration for him, he slapped and kicked us. We tried to feign affection, but he saw through our pretense and struck us harder. An older slave woman whispered to us about the homes with two vines. So we ran away into the night and came to you."

A few days later, a surprise occurred. The runaway pair went to Hella with a confession. She brought them before the council again and I recorded their new report:

"We want you to know the truth: We were sent by the military. After Commander Malgon's troop disappeared, the Assembly posted a price on the heads of Amazons. Our merchant master is friends with high-ranking officers, who came to us with an offer. We would be allowed to escape, to find our way to the unknown home of the Amazons. If we succeeded, we were to slip away at night, return to Kavopolis and reveal your location so that soldiers could attack. For our service, we were promised freedom plus a reward great enough that we might acquire homes and husbands.

"However, now that we have tasted your welcome and felt the comradeship of your life together and seen your spirit as free women, we do not wish to betray you. We will not return to the Greek world. We want to remain with you."

The council applauded. Hella stood between the girls with her arms around their shoulders. The Amazon leaders were pleased to have thwarted a Greek military scheme.

Later that day, an ominous thought crossed my mind. That night, curled in bed with Litha, I explained my fear:

"Greek commanders are not stupid. Surely they knew that two slave concubines would choose freedom among Amazons instead of returning to the miserable life of Greek women. What if the military plot had a second trick? What if a male spy followed the escaping girls, staying hidden, patiently waiting as they proceeded along the path of two vines, watching until he saw them enter the concealed valley?"

Litha sat up, her body silvered by moonlight through her window. Her brow furrowed.

"We must tell Hella. Maybe it's only a suspicion, but let's tell her anyway."

Next morning we went to the Home Queen and recited our concern. Hella pursed her lips and nodded slowly.

"Yes. Yes. That's possible. But how can we know? It's just a guess."

Nonetheless, she went to the War Queen and they called a brief council meeting. It was decided to instruct the sentry at the mouth of the valley to stay intently vigilant, and to send a disguised warrior to houses of two vines to learn if anything was amiss.

In subsequent days the apprehension receded from our minds. Then Litha and I forgot it entirely as we encountered a worse alarm.

32

Not long after the wheat harvest, Litha clutched me excitedly, her face glowing.

"I'm pregnant. My flow hasn't returned."

We both felt jumbled emotions. I embraced her intensely, then held her at arm's length by her shoulders and repeated our old worry:

"What if it's a boy? Remember what Amazons do with boys."

"Maybe it will be a girl--" she trailed off, unsure.

We sank onto her pallet and made love, but with caution by me, as I now considered her more vulnerable.

In coming days, we felt the magical excitement of a couple creating life. Her breasts swelled and she looked radiant. The bond between us grew tighter than ever.

But her glow caused an unexpected problem. A week later she came to me with an odd report. One of the strongest Amazon warriors, Zelena, who never slept with male slaves, had seized Litha at the bathing pool and kissed her. The warrior was hard-muscled, with a long shoulder scar from a past Greek sword slash. As Litha squirmed to separate their wet bodies, Zelena blurted that her longtime lover had been Celeste, who died of inflamed wounds after the Malgon raid. Since then Zelena had suffered grief and loneliness. But she was drawn to Litha's young beauty and wanted her for her own.

Cautiously, Litha explained to Zelena that she was committed to the slave Melos and was carrying his baby. Zelena looked pained by rejection. The following day she complained among warriors that Amazon values were decaying, that a limping male slave was rated more desirable than a brave fighting woman. Zelena was seen protesting to Eila the priestess. Next, ominously, the council met without my presence as its scribe. Afterward, Hella called me to her quarters and told me:

"I tried to protect you, but Zelena and Eila were strident. They argued that we Amazons are growing weak, losing our solidarity, which worsened our losses in the brothel raid at Balaris. Zelena and Eila convinced the council that strong action is needed to reassert faith in the Amazon way. The council decreed that the next male baby born in our village will be sacrificed to Hera, so the queen goddess always will accompany our warriors to protect them in battle. Your best student, Allena, was chosen to write this decree and post it for all."

I was dismayed. Even though our baby's birth was months away, and even though it might be a girl, the action was aimed squarely at Litha and me. Ours was the only known pregnancy. Essetha, who milked the nanny goats, had given birth to a girl the previous month. And Bellina, a young warrior who excelled in horseback combat, had suffered a miscarriage, perhaps from her violent riding. No other Amazon showed looming maternity.

When I told her, Litha grew agitated, almost irrational. I held her until quiet returned. We talked far into the night about our predicament. The next day, as I fashioned bricks at the clay bank, she came and called me aside urgently.

"We must escape this place," she said. "We don't belong here any more than we belong among the Greeks. However, my cousins in Slavia would give us a home in the hills, far away from people."

I interrupted: "We've discussed this before. You know that I can't run."

"But you can *ride*! The solution came to me this morning. Late at night, we could take horses from the pasture and sneak past the sentry on the cliff."

I saw her logic. "Yes, especially during rain. It would muffle our sounds. And the sentry would be under her horsehide shelter with rain patter filling her ears."

Our plan was set. We began secret preparations. Litha and I each hid packets of dried food. We observed horses in the pasture and learned the location of bridles and saddles in the tack shed so we could find them in the dark. Rain was sparse in this land south of the Black Sea, but we knew that our night would come.

It did. Drizzle started one afternoon and didn't cease. I saw Litha briefly as we passed on a lane and we both nodded. We were tense with anticipation. Unfortunately, during dinner a girl came to the slave quarters and notified me: "The warrior Comella orders you to her chamber tonight. Bathe and obey."

Consternation flooded me. I hurried to Litha's room.

"Shall we cancel and wait for another night?"

"No," she replied. "It may not rain again for a month, and by then I'll be too big to gallop."

"Shall I go to Comella and meet you afterward?"

"No, because she may make you sleep with her all night. Besides, from now on, all your nights are mine."

On the spot, we agreed to take the gamble immediately. The rain was bringing darkness early. I returned to the slave quarters, got my food stash, and pretended to go toward the lower pool. Then I hobbled on my cane to the horse paddock, where Litha was waiting.

"After a while, Comella will wonder why you didn't appear," she said. "But by then we will be heading down the Thermodon Valley to freedom."

We chose two calm mares, slipped on their bridles and strapped tight the sheepskin saddles over saddle blankets. We tied our food pouches behind the saddles. I never had ridden before, but my mare was gentle and obedient. We slipped like ghosts through the rainy darkness.

As we neared the sentry station, we dismounted and led the horses quietly. The pouring rain concealed us. We passed undetected and entered the broad Thermodon Valley. We were afraid to gallop in the dark, lest a horse stumble over a rock or break a leg in an unseen hole, as befell unlucky Oona. All night we proceeded. The rain ceased.

At dawn we could see Balaris in the distance. We turned westward, threading through hills, wondering if the lookout Olandra might be posted on a crest. Finally we hid in woods and let our horses graze in a grassy patch. Freedom was within our reach. At the western end of the Black Sea, we would turn north to Slavia. We ate our dried food, spread our saddle blankets on moss, crawled between them, and slept soundly.

Our freedom lasted only one night. We woke with Baloo the tracking hound licking our faces. Behind him were two mounted Amazons, LEEANtha and Comella, grinning about their ease in capturing us.

"Melos, you should have come to my bed last night," Comella taunted as she dismounted. "I'd have given you a better ride than your escape horse."

LEEANtha joined the mockery: "Remember when you made me scream in bed, Melos? How could you forsake a real fighting woman like me for this spindly sheep-tender?"

They didn't bother to draw their weapons because they knew we were defenseless before them. Fleeing on foot would have been futile, while the pursuers had horses. I doubt that they would have killed us, but they might have put arrows into our legs if we kept running. The warriors continued chuckling as they pulled us to our feet, tied our hands behind us, hoisted us onto our horses, and led us back the way we had come.

The return to the Amazon hideaway took all day because our captors watched carefully for travelers and stayed in woodlands most of the way. It was dusk as we were led into the heart of the village. Women stared at us. The War Queen and the priestess glowered. Hella shook her head sadly.

"Tomorrow evening, the council will decide their punishment," Saria declared. "Lock them in the confinement room."

We were led to the Amazon barn. Most of the interior was a high open chamber. At the rear, reachable only by a ladder, was an attic room behind a narrow landing. We were led up the ladder and shoved inside. Our hands were untied. Then a wooden bar was inserted outside the door and the ladder was removed. Prisoners, Litha and I held each other tightly.

"Surely they won't put us to death," I speculated.

"I don't know," she replied. "Maybe they'll make us wish we were dead."

We lay down in straw, holding each other, and fell asleep.

33

We woke next morning when the ladder clunked against the landing and the bar scraped outside the attic door. Two girls greeted us with breakfast of bread and goat milk. Then they barred the door again, removed the ladder, and left us alone. The Amazons knew that we couldn't escape and didn't bother to send an armed warrior when our door was opened.

We ate quietly. Our attic cell was windowless but had two air vents large enough for us to peer outside. We surveyed the village. After the rain, morning sunshine was streaming into the lovely valley. Late-summer heat was returning. In the distance a few women splashed in the bathing pool, their wet bodies sparkling in the sun.

The hillside used for morning warrior practice was directly behind the barn. We heard voices and saw Amazons scrambling up the slope for their daily drill, almost beside us. They were in full armor and carried bundles of arrows and javelins. For archery training, they shot at targets on a mossy bank that was soft enough for arrows to be extracted undamaged.

"I don't see Mitha among the warriors," I said.

"She drew sentry duty above the cliff each morning," Litha replied.

We sat in the straw, resigned to a long day of waiting, unsure of our evening fate before the council. We discussed ways we might plead for leniency.

Near noon, horror struck. We heard galloping hoofbeats, male war shouts, and an outcry of Amazon voices. Stunned, we leaped to the air vents and stared. A brigade of Greek troops rushed from the downstream thicket and charged into the village with weapons flashing. The naked women and girls in the pool froze, defenseless. The onrushing soldiers swept past them. The long-feared Greek army attack had burst upon the Amazon village like a tornado. We hardly could breathe. Our hearts pounded violently.

On the slope beside us, the War Queen shouted for her fighters to repel the invaders. Luckily, the female warriors had full quivers of arrows, plus their swords and axes, with javelins stacked nearby. From their vantage point, the women archers had deadly effect. They brought down the foremost charging horses, then killed the staggering riders as they struggled to their feet. Greek foot soldiers shrieked and fell as javelins and arrows whizzed into them. A soldier with an arrow through his abdomen groaned and cursed as he crawled desperately. Another died grotesquely with an arrow in his eye.

Greek archers fanned out rapidly near our barn and began flanking the women fighters on the hillside. Greek arrows found their mark, and some Amazons fell down the slope. Around the village, home women ran from doors and grabbed swords, shields, spears and double-bladed axes from the armory hut. They rushed to the fray, striking from behind at Greeks facing the hill. The battle surged horribly, with clanging metal and screams of the wounded. Gruesome death took first a Greek, then an Amazon, then another Greek, then another Amazon. Bodies littered the ground, but remaining fighters seemed oblivious to them as they flailed each other in a frenzy. Fighting toe to toe, an Amazon and Greek ran each other through simultaneously, their sword points emerging from each other's backs. They fell together almost in an embrace.

Litha and I were paralyzed as we stared at the slaughter. We saw Leeantha, who had laughed at our capture only the day before, swing her ax ferociously, toppling Greeks who surrounded her. Then one speared her in the back. Blood gushed from her mouth and she fell face-down.

We saw Olandra, the maimed lookout from the Black Sea coast, gallop into the fray on horseback, striking Greeks from behind. She had returned to the hidden valley just in time to encounter the battle. Using her one healthy hand, she swung her axe ferociously, downing three male foot soldiers. Turning, other Greeks hacked her legs with their swords and Greek archers targeted her. An arrow pierced her shoulder, but she kept swinging. A second arrow lodged in her side and her attack wavered. A third went through her neck and she slowly slid from the saddle.

By a paddock stall, Bellina, the star horseback fighter, was mounting a steed when a Greek arrow killed her. She fell into the dirt, but

her foot remained caught in a stirrup, and the startled horse dragged her body across the field.

The rage of battle was mindless. Among the bypassed women and girls in the pool was Zelena, who had craved Litha. Zelena was the only Amazon warrior who hadn't been training when the attack erupted. She scrambled nude from the water, seized a tough tree branch lying on the creek bank, ran after the charging Greek foot-soldiers, and clubbed them from behind. She struck down two with ferocious blows that broke their necks. As others turned, she killed one with a terrible smash in the face. But other Greeks, armored and shielded, surrounded the naked fighter and chopped her down with their swords.

We saw the Home Queen swing a long sword, decapitating a Greek foot soldier. Then a young Greek in the fine armor of an officer appeared on a rock above her with his sword raised for a lethal blow. Incredibly, it was my old best friend, Rectus from Aegolus, now a Kavopolis warrior. I was stunned and heard myself yell from the air vent: "REK! NO!"

At my cry, Rek looked for an instant toward the barn. The Home Queen whirled and thrust upward with her sword, stabbing deep beneath his armor. Immediately, a Greek javelin plunged through her. They fell together in a heap. I was so horrified that I vomited in the attic straw.

Litha clutched her throat, choking back sobs as she remained at the portal. I held her and we both peered through the same vent.

The battle ended quickly. Below us was a sickening scene. All the Amazon warriors lay dead or groaning with horrible wounds, along with the home women who had joined the bloodbath. The War Queen's body lay head-down below us. Princess Xanthia was sprawled over a rock, an arrow protruding from her chest. On the slope below her lay the corpses of her two former maids. The freed slave Pendilee lay curled in a ball, hugging her fatal wounds. Farther away, Eila the priestess was face-down under the Hera statue at her shrine. Not far from her lay a dark form that I recognized as Racha the Nubian. She had fallen across the corpse of Theba, the prince's daughter. Astelle the baker was dead in the doorway of her bakery. Nearby lay the body of the Amazon construction chief, my former bedmate. Hanging lifeless from a window of the warrior quarters was Allena, my star writing pupil. Beside the door of the armory, where

she had been handing out weapons, lay Kella, the elder council member. Essetha the goatherd lay on the creek bank with a spear through her. Farther away, we saw more Amazon bodies in the creek.

Most of the Greek force likewise was dead. Only six Greek warriors remained standing, along with their sharp-faced commander. At his order, the Greek survivors walked around the battlefield spearing fallen Amazons who still moved. Elysia, the young warrior who had read aloud in my class, was trying to rise from the ground, clutching her wounds, when a soldier ran her through. She fell lifeless.

The aftermath brought a stunned sense of unreality. Male slaves emerged from their workplaces, staring at the carnage. Old Octos arrived on his crutches and was speechless for the first time in his life. He looked open-mouthed at the sprawled bodies. Augur, the bungling astrologer, was even more round-eyed than usual.

Two wounded Greeks called out from where they lay. Their comrades carried them to the commander and bandaged them.

The Greek soldiers searched buildings and found two dozen home women and girls hiding behind barricaded doors. They were dragged out and lined up, along with the nude group from the pool. Without a word, soldiers threw two of the naked women to the ground and raped them. The women didn't resist or cry out, knowing they would be killed if they did. The Greek commander watched in silence, then turned to the male slaves:

"Men, you are liberated, saved by the army of Kavopolis. I am Commander Patros and my men are the finest fighters in all of Greece. We will take you home to freedom. These women will be returned to their proper place in bondage."

The surviving females were tied together by their necks into a string of prisoners. All the Amazon horses and wagons were brought. Bodies of the dead Greek warriors were loaded into two wagons. Weapons collected from dead Amazons and Greeks alike filled another. Then the soldiers ransacked buildings, carrying out treasure that had been scavenged from caravan raids. It filled a fourth wagon. Male slaves were helped into a fifth wagon, along with five tiny girls from the playroom, wailing. The wounded Greeks were lifted into a sixth, which would convey the commander and surviving soldiers. Finally the victors

carried bread from the bakery for the long trip home. The triumphal caravan of wagons and tied-together women--a military victory procession--was ready to leave.

It didn't occur to the surviving Greeks to look in the vacant barn. Litha and I remained frozen in silence, keeping our faces slightly back from the portals, hidden in shadows. Then we lay in the straw, listening to sounds of the departing wagon train.

"Oh God!--Mitha!" Litha whispered hoarsely.

"Maybe she escaped from her sentry spot when the attack started," I offered.

Litha wasn't consoled. She was frantic. I held her tight as the last wagon sounds faded. We waited and waited. Utter silence filled the village. Through the vents we saw Amazon bodies strewn everywhere, but no signs of life.

We pondered how to unlock our cell. We shook the door but the bar remained lodged. We looked around the attic chamber. Eventually we found a slender stick amid the straw. Poking it through a crack, we succeeded in lifting the outer bar from its cradle and the door swung open. But we remained trapped high above the barn floor. With my damaged knees, I couldn't jump from the landing, so I gripped Litha's wrists and lowered her. She replaced the ladder for me to descend.

We emerged into the valley of death. I stared at the Amazon corpses, feeling sick. But Litha seemed obsessed. Without a word, she ran toward the sentry post at the valley's mouth. Eventually she returned, sobbing.

For the rest of the day, we seemed unable to move. We sat by the pool, clutching each other. Litha wept repeatedly. That night we went to her room in the novice building. Strangely, the overwhelming emotions of the day caused an unexpected effect: We made love desperately, almost in agony, then fell asleep.

Next morning, we surveyed the carnage. We decided to bury the bodies quickly, because we didn't want to see our friends decay. Altogether, twenty-six dead Amazons lay in the town. We lacked the strength to carry them up to the burial knoll and dig so many graves. One by one, we pulled them to a small depression in the ground. We lay them

side by side, with their arms folded. We put the War Queen at one end of the row and the Home Queen at the other. Princess Xanthia lay beside onetime slaves and concubines, equal in death. From a sandy bank we scooped loose dirt and covered them. And we placed flat stones above them as markers.

On a rise near a hillside, the War Queen's tomb stood finished except for placement of wide roof rocks. Litha and I decided that this place of honor should belong to her sister. I limped with her to the valley mouth and we carried Mitha back. We lowered her gently into the tomb. Litha clutched me and sobbed again.

Then we searched the buildings for remaining finery to entomb with Mitha. We installed most of the sepulcher roof. But we didn't cement the final stone, because I wanted to enclose my written account of the Amazons, as soon as I added their violent end. To my relief, the looting soldiers hadn't taken my stash of parchments. The illiterate warriors probably considered writing worthless.

Litha picked wildflowers and laid them in her sister's tomb.

The following day, under bushes, we found the body of Comella, who had staggered out of sight and died of wounds. She still clutched her ancient bronze shield and new iron battleaxe. We buried her with her weapons near Mitha's tomb like a guardian.

Silence hung over the empty Amazon village that once rang with life.

34

Nature doesn't care whether people slaughter each other. After the battle of the Amazon village, sunshine and moonlight still graced the hidden valley. Squirrels scampered in trees as before, and birds flitted. Figs continued to ripen in their grove, as did olives in their trees and grapes in their arbor. Sheep in the hill pastures still grazed placidly. Goats in the upper valley still swelled with milk. Late beans ripened in the fields. A shower washed away bloodstains, and grasses sprouted on the new graves. Nature continued as if nothing had happened.

No horses, wagons, weapons or treasures remained in the colony, but a pantry overlooked by the Greek soldiers contained dried food, and late crops ripened. Without discussion, Litha and I knew that we would continue living alone in the deserted village. It would have been unthinkable to return to the ruthless outside world. I felt revulsion toward my own people, and I couldn't limp all the way to her Slavic homeland without horses.

We moved into the War Queen's large quarters, finest in the village. We hoped that no outsiders would return to disturb our hideaway. If they did, we agreed, we would slip furtively into the woods and hide at the shepherd cottage out of sight in the hills. We stored dried food there in case of such an intrusion.

The coming time was sad, yet strangely satisfying. We milked the nanny goats each evening. We harvested beans, figs and grapes. We swam naked in the pool daily. Sometimes we made love on the grass beside the pool. At nights we had rapturous sex on the War Queen's luxurious pallet. In mornings, watching Litha sleep beside me, feeling the warmth of her nearness, seeing her belly begin to swell with our baby, brought me serenity.

We saw clearly that the simple life--just being together, helping each other, working side by side, caring for each other--is an unshakable foundation. It gives more inner peace than all the rewards and possessions pursued in life.

Mostly we talked, confiding our thoughts and feelings. In long discussions, we articulated our own truths. We pondered them again and again. Now, with Litha looking over my shoulder, I am recording our conclusions for any who may someday find these writings:

First, the war urge is animal savagery. People have a combat instinct like the drive that makes strange dogs lunge and bite each other. Greek warriors kill Ionians. Ionian soldiers kill Corinthians. Thracians kill Amazons. Amazons kill Scythians. Spartans kill Athenians. Thessalonians kill Phocians. There's never a time when warriors aren't fighting. It is insane. Both sides lose. Communities fear and hate each other without reason. It's a terrible waste of lives and wealth. Think of the prosperity people might enjoy if their strong sons stayed home and worked, instead of being sent to kill the sons of other lands. In every city, politicians praise the noble patriotism of those who battle for their homeland. The politicians spend the public's gold for bigger armies and more deadly weaponry. When five hundred of their young men die in a battle, but a thousand enemy youths are killed, it is called a great victory for the honor of the homeland. It is madness. Nearly all the slaughter is by males, yet it was just as mad when Amazons took up warfare.

Second, all the prayers to invisible gods, all the sacrifices on altars, all the pleas to oracles, all the casting of bones and charting of horoscopes, are futile and childish. The many, many temples and shrines are based upon make-believe. Every day in Greece, ten thousand prayers are chanted to Zeus, and ten thousand to Aphrodite, and a hundred thousand to the other gods. And multitudes of goats, lambs, dogs, chickens, even horses and oxen, are sacrificed on their altars. And long lines of people wait to question the oracles. But it's all fantasy. It never brings healings or good weather or victory in war. There are no gods on Mount Olympus or anywhere else. They're myths dreamed up by superstitious people. Priests proclaim the "truth" of the deities to give themselves power over others. They put people to death for questioning their dogma. Nobody can know whether heavens and hells await after death, as the priests claim, so it is pointless to expend prayers and sacrifices on an unlikely afterlife.

One evening Litha and I dragged the three wooden goddess statues from their shrine and burned them as a cheery bonfire by the

bathing pool. Hera, Aphrodite and Artemis crackled nicely, lighting the darkness. It was the only time they gave enlightenment.

Another evil is the sway of masters over underlings and males over females. Who gave the lords such power? Who decreed that the Overseer could rule everyone in Aegolus and own Litha as a possession, to be flogged when he wanted? No god appeared and bestowed that authority on him. This code of domination must have grown long ago, when big men subjugated small women, and the strongest men subjugated weaker ones.

The only pure value we can find is for two lovers to hold fast together, giving each other comfort and strength and shelter from the surrounding turmoil. Litha and I have pledged to raise our children in love and security to the utmost of our ability, and to remain bonded until death, with neither the ruler of the other. Without priests or magistrates, we have formed our own marriage.

This concludes our record of the Amazons and the story of our lives so far. Today, Litha and I will seal these books in the vault with Mitha in hope that our words someday will be shared by people who find the Amazon tomb.

35

Jack and Carolina rode to the Ankara Airport in a university car driven by a clerk of the Turkish Antiquities Ministry. They jetted to London to begin their book tour. Thanks to Dr. Chichester's connections, a British publisher had printed their translation of the amazing record left by the scribe Melos and his beloved Litha, telling of the fearless Amazons. The popular book became an international success, translated into a dozen languages, and they were scheduled for speaking appearances. The volume, along with their other work on the Thermodon find, became material toward their archeology doctorates.

For their book lectures, Carolina prepared a Power Point slide show of Amazon sculptures and pottery scenes, plus photos of the Thermodon dig and the codexes left by Melos and Litha.

Women's groups delighted in the account of fierce females who fought back in a male world. The two young archeologists stressed that the Amazons probably wouldn't have become warriors if ancient Greece's slavery and extreme male dominance hadn't driven them to rebel. At London's Royal Albert Hall, before a mixed audience, Carolina and Jack presented an overview on male supremacy. She began:

"Except for the fleeting episode of the Amazons, masculine rule has prevailed in every culture known on this planet. Until our discovery, no researcher ever found a matriarchal society or even one with gender equality. In the 1930s, Margaret Mead thought she found a female-led group in New Guinea, but she later reversed her conclusion and wrote: 'All the claims so glibly made about societies ruled by women are nonsense. We have no reason to believe that they ever existed.... Men everywhere have been in charge of running the show.' Well, Mead was wrong twice. Our discovery in the Thermodon Valley revealed a brief female reign."

Jack continued:

"Obviously, male dominance grew in prehistoric or even pre-human times, deriving from anatomy and biology. Heavier, stronger

males are better suited for fighting off predators, killing game and building shelters. Women, lighter and built for baby-bearing, inescapably must produce the children. Childbirth is a vulnerable time when they need protection in a secure nest, making them dependent on men who guarded the nest and brought food. Undoubtedly, this biological reality set the stage for men to be out in the world, aggressive, while women tended the home and children, nurturing them. Today, the unanswered question is: Did this primitive pattern make men permanently the assertive gender, leaving women forever consigned to more passive roles?"

Carolina:

"As civilization grew and mental abilities, not physical brawn, slowly became the deciding factor of success, why didn't women make greater advances? There never was a female Socrates, or female Shakespeare, or female Beethoven, or female Rembrandt, or female Einstein, or female world chess champion. I think it's because the burden of tending babies, preparing food, making clothes, and the rest of home duty is so overwhelming that women historically had no time or energy for mind games. This bred cultural prejudice that deemed women unsuited for bold, dynamic roles. For centuries, it would have been absurd to suggest educating women for careers in science or business or politics because it 'simply wasn't done.' Women were denied the right to vote until recently. Incredibly, Swiss women didn't gain full voting rights in all districts until 1991. Women couldn't serve on juries in some American states until the 1950s. America still refuses to pass an Equal Rights Amendment to its constitution. Most Muslim countries today treat women the way Christian lands did in medieval times."

Jack:

"Some of us men are ardent feminists. Not only do we want full equality for women, but we think women's values are superior, deserving priority. Men's values focus on warfare, competition for wealth, and other sorts of rivalry, which add up to privilege for the superior or fortunate ones. Men always have waged war and committed the vast majority of crimes and violence. Women's values usually are those of home and family. They focus on nurture and care: better nutrition, better education, better health, better job security, better housing, more freedom to limit family size, reduction of poverty, equal treatment of everyone, better

protection for the elderly and infirm, and other personal safeguards that make families secure."

Carolina:

"When Nietzsche wrote *The Will to Power*, he really wasn't talking about females. Although a rare few women may crave to thrust themselves into dominance, the desire for power has been a male urge since prehistoric time. Men are propelled by testosterone. They will drive themselves relentlessly and suffer hardship in striving to gain high status. But women don't want to be King of the Mountain the way men do. The masculine Will to Power may be rooted in the same biochemistry seen in animal species which have fierce competition for the role of 'alpha male.'"

Jack:

"Male dominance is a curse on humanity, producing wars and violence, as well as rule of the 'haves' over the 'have-nots.' Unfortunately, it may be so deeply locked into our species that it never can be fully erased, no matter how many equality laws are passed. Sadly, when the Amazons rebelled, they had to employ male-style swords and spears, but it wasn't enough to save them from extinction."

Carolina:

"Yet, somehow, the Amazon image meets a need in us. Subconsciously we relish the thought of truly liberated women who fought for their own liberty."

* * *

After the London lecture, Jack and Carolina had a lull before their next appearance. Dr. Chichester invited them to his country cottage, where they mostly loafed. Curled together in bed with their bare legs entwined under the linens, they felt content and happy. Simple touching is vital to a good couple, along with all the other sharings of togetherness.

On lovely autumn afternoons, they took long walks through the rolling English countryside amid stone fences.

"Let's make a pledge," Jack declared as they sat under a yew tree, "that we'll never go sour on each other like the millions of sad couples who wind up in divorce or dreary, dead marriages."

"Of course, of course, but maybe those poor couples can't avoid it. Nobody chooses to be miserable, yet so many are."

"Well, I won't let it happen to us. You're the best thing in my life, and I'll hang onto you as tightly as Melos clung to Litha. Even if the world is full of stupid chaos, if ignorant armies clash by night, you and I make a safe refuge for each other."

When they returned to the cottage, old Chichester greeted them with tea and insight:

"I've been rereading the scribe's record. It underscores what we all know: that the great war between science and religion began in Ancient Greece. Classic Greek thinkers were the first to try to understand nature and life through observation and testing and logic. This put them at odds with priests and their supernatural explanations involving gods and miracles and afterworlds."

Carolina added: "Yes, but remember: about 1,500 years of limbo passed before the Greek ideas caught fire. The religious Dark Ages blanked out science like a shroud. Greek wisdom mostly was forgotten. The Renaissance didn't blossom until ancient Greek texts finally were brought west by Byzantine scholars fleeing Muslim invaders, and by some Muslim scholars who had preserved documents. That's when scientific thinking started to flower in the West, breaking the old grip of supernaturalism."

Next day, Chichester got an important phone call. The United Nations Commission on Women invited Jack and Carolina to speak at the World Summit for Women's Equality, scheduled two weeks hence at the European U.N. headquarters at Geneva. They were delighted to accept.

On the day before the summit, they jetted to Switzerland and were greeted as honored guests. U.N. officials showed them the stately Palace of Nations overlooking Lake Geneva, with its surrounding park dotted with peacocks. They were briefed on the upcoming sessions, which focused on the subjugation of women throughout history and in parts of the modern world. The printed program for the summit contained a statement from Amnesty International:

"In the United States, a woman is raped every six minutes; a woman is battered every 15 seconds. In North Africa, 6,000 women are

genitally mutilated each day. This year, more than 15,000 women will be sold into sexual slavery in China. Two hundred women in Bangladesh will be horribly disfigured when their spurned husbands or suitors burn them with acid. More than 7,000 women in India will be murdered by their families and in-laws in disputes over dowries. Violence against women is rooted in a global culture of discrimination which denies women equal rights with men and which legitimizes the appropriation of women's bodies for individual gratification or political ends. Every year, violence in the home and the community devastates the lives of millions of women."

That grim summation set a solemn tone for the summit. All evening in their hotel room, Jack and Carolina polished their remarks. Next day, they stood together at the rostrum of the majestic assembly hall before a thousand delegates from two hundred nations. Again speaking alternately, they outlined the gross mistreatment of women in ancient Greece, which spawned the Amazons. During millennia that followed, the archeologists noted, neither religion nor male rulers raised females much above servitude. Then the Enlightenment brought a new age of human rights, leading to democracies that slowly mandated parity for women.

"However," Jack told the assembly, "although every Western society now has laws decreeing female equality, we all know that males mostly dominate. Laws haven't fully erased age-old inequality. Great progress has been made in advanced democracies, and women are flooding universities and the workplace, but they still aren't quite as free as men to plunge into the world and make their mark. And, as the Amnesty International statement spelled out, women in many lands remain vulnerable to abuse, sometimes subtle, sometimes barbaric."

Carolina shifted the topic slightly:

"Good couples who care deeply for each other can offset the unfairness. They work as a private team, making a shelter against the surrounding culture. That message shines clearly in the ancient account of Melos and Litha. The destruction of the Amazon colony didn't break their bond of love. They created their own nation of two, soon to be three. Nobody knows what happened to them: whether their child was born healthy, whether they were left unmolested in the vacant village, whether they lived long or short, whether they remained faithful to the end. All that is known is the words on parchment that lay undiscovered for more than two thousand years."

Jack concluded: "But it is enough."

* * *

When they returned to their hotel room, Jack stood by a large window, gazing at the great plane of Lake Geneva. He was in a heavy mood. Quietly he said:

"People live for a while, then they are gone. We're all moving toward death. That's the biggest fact of life, yet nobody seems to grasp it."

Carolina joined him and slid her hand around his waist. Arm-in-arm, they watched the vast water. Jack continued:

"Melos and Litha have been dead more than two thousand years. So why do we care about them? They were just one couple among a billion long-gone couples. To people today, it doesn't matter whether they were a loving pair, or whether they were cruel slaveowners, or priests sacrificing animals on altars, or warriors butchering people."

Carolina was silent, then slowly responded:

"It matters. In fact, how people live is the only thing that matters. Since life is temporary, we must try hard to make it good while we can. Litha and Melos lived in a bloody, crazy time, yet they wouldn't join the lunacy. They did their best to make a private shelter for each other. They found the most important truth of all."

AUTHOR

James A. Haught was born on Feb. 20, 1932, in a small West Virginia farm town that had no electricity or paved streets. He graduated from a rural high school with 13 students in the senior class. He came to Charleston, worked as a delivery boy, then became a teen-age apprentice printer at the Charleston Daily Mail in 1951. Developing a yen to be a reporter, he volunteered to work without pay in the Daily Mail newsroom on his days off to learn the trade. This arrangement continued several months, until The Charleston Gazette offered a full-time news job in 1953. He has been at the Gazette ever since - except for a few months in 1959 when he was press aide to Sen. Robert Byrd.

During his six decades in newspaper life, he has been police reporter, religion columnist, feature writer and night city editor - then he was investigative reporter for 13 years, and his work led to several corruption convictions. In 1983 he was named associate editor, and in 1992 he became editor. In 2015, as The Gazette combined with the Daily Mail, he assumed the title of editor emeritus, but still works full-time. He writes nearly 400 Gazette editorials a year, plus personal columns and news articles.

Haught has won two dozen national newswriting awards, and is author of 11 books and 100 magazine essays. About 60 of his columns have been distributed by national syndicates. He also is a senior editor of Free Inquiry magazine. He is listed in Who's Who in America, Who's Who in the World, Contemporary Authors and 2000 Outstanding Intellectuals of the 21st Century. He has four children, 12 grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

His books include "Holy Horrors" (1990), "Science in a Nanosecond" (1990), "Holy Hatred" (1995), "2,000 Years of Disbelief" (1996), "Honest Doubt" (2007), "Amazon Moon" (2007), "Fascinating West Virginia" (2008), "Fading Faith"

(2010), “Religion is Dying” (2014), “Hurrah for Liberals (2016), plus a 1992 art book featuring lovers depicted by master artists, to refute both bluenose censors and crude pornographers.

For years, he enjoyed hiking with Kanawha Trail Club, participating in a philosophy group, and taking grandchildren swimming off his old sailboat. He is a longtime member of Charleston’s Unitarian Universalist Congregation.

Haught continues working full-time at 85.

